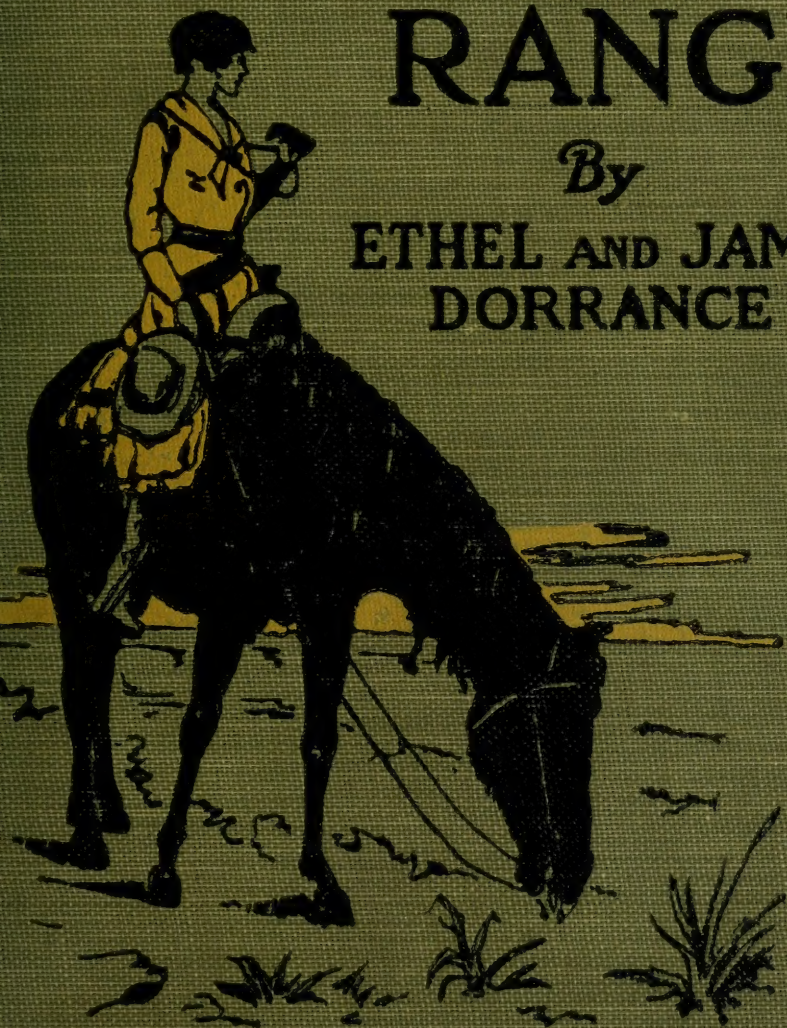


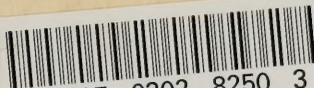
# GLORY RIDES *the* RANGE

By  
ETHEL AND JAMES  
DORRANCE





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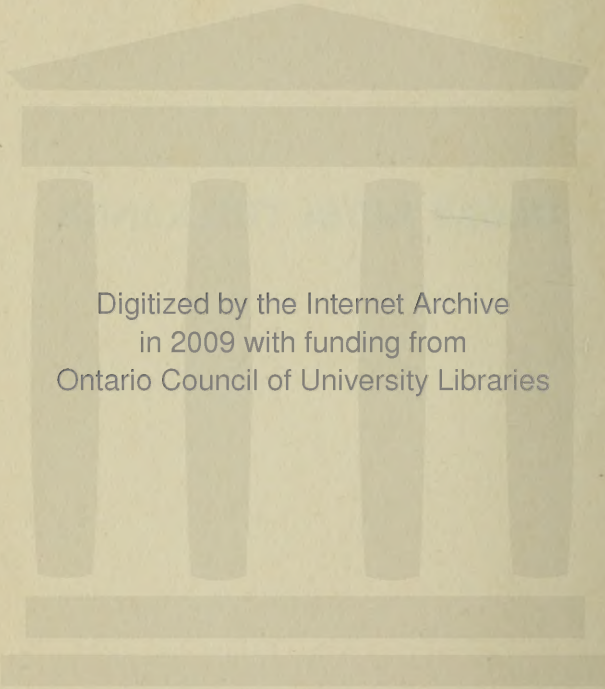
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GLORY RIDES THE RANGE



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"There Goes Your Outlaw Daddie, Connie Horse."

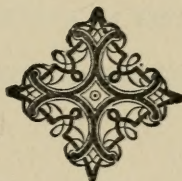
*(Glory Rides the Range)*

# GLORY RIDES THE RANGE

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By ETHEL AND JAMES DORRANCE

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FRONTISPIECE

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Publishers New York

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TO  
THE RED-HEADS OF THE WORLD  
AND  
THEIR ADMIRERS



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GLORY RIDES THE RANGE





# GLORY RIDES THE RANGE

## CHAPTER I

### SANS ADMISSION OR TAX

A GIRL and a horse—you'd never have thought they could bear so many points of resemblance. But if you could have seen Gloriana Frazer and her bay mount streaking the trail this hot Arizona afternoon, you'd have begun to notice.

Both were rangy in build, yet taut of muscle; both young, as youth compares in horse and human; both trained to the limit of capability and endurance. Even stronger in tone than the mane backward-flung by the wind was the copper braid, thick as a puncher's wrist, which coroneted the head beneath the wide-brimmed felt hat.

Alike were the two pairs of eyes, tawny as topaz, with darker stripes around the irides. Long, brown lashes, the flash of ivory teeth—yes, even certain freckles upon both noses carried out the similitude.

And in spirit—

Well, it was only when you knew them that you could appreciate how the two were one. Although in the beginning they had been assigned to each other on account of their coloring, a singleness of enjoyment now coupled them. With chests expanded to the vital air, nostrils dilated sensitively, heads thrown back and mouths laughing from the sheer well-being of power to spare, they bent to the going in perfect rhythm.

In the shade of a piñon clump the girl halted her mount, removed her hat, pushed back her hair to the breeze. There was none to appreciate that the forehead uncovered was white as milk, for the green lizard slithering in the dust just below was unable to focus his jetty eyes so high and the screech-owl, perched upon the limb of a scrub above, was quite too sound asleep.

Atop an enflanking ridge ample excuse for a few minutes' lag was being unreeled, sans admission or tax—a marvelous, natural-history motion-picture. The muffled accompaniment of many thudding hoofs invited attention to the "show" of a hundred-odd wild horses in purposeful migration. A single-tinted film of bright color they looked at this distance, unwinding toward the desert.

Screwing her binoculars into focus, Gloriana

looked; next moment exclaimed in an excited way as she recognized the band. There was no mistaking the "Streak," if one ever had seen or even heard of that regal stallion. A "spook" horse, the Apaches had dubbed him when, season in and season out, he had evaded their most wily snares. "Outlaw," "land pirate," "thief-by-night"—these were supplementary appellations used by the ranchmen whose mares and colts he had nosed away. To the list they later had added "Satan's Son," when his sleek hide had proved impervious to the aim of the best marksmen among them.

"Yonder goes your Daddy-Blazes, Connie." The girl leaned forward in the saddle and, with the lift of one rein, urged her horse's head in the general direction. "There goes your whole family, in fact. Shall I loosen the latigo and slip the throat-latch for a prodigal's return?"

But Con snorted what she chose to consider a negative answer, stamping a petulant forefoot for emphasis.

"No? Is it that you don't love them, or love me more—or only that you know too well where your oats are threshed?"

His willingness on the trail toward the inspection of her mule band—the errand on which they were bound—recalled the day when he had become

her personal property, an acquisition due to the fact that both were "red-heads."

The Blaze outfit had been off on a six-day "walk-down" after the very outlaw who by now had disappeared through a cleft in the ridges. Six months would not have sufficed, the ranch hands had declared self-respectingly, to put a string on the Streak. From the chuck-wagon they had produced their only capture, a spindle-legged colt, made "doggie" by the persistence of their unsuccessful drive.

At once the young girl's mother-instinct had gone out to the orphan. Flinging her arms around his neck, she had claimed him on the spot. This humanitarian adoption had the full approval of the "walkers," for there portended certain "doggie" rites of bottle-feeding and hair-combing which might best be performed by feminine hand. Several of the punchers joined in the promise that they would attend the placement upon his rump of her personal brand—a "Flying G"—as soon as he graduated to grass-eating.

No bisque doll of other girls' pinafore days ever enjoyed more devotion than that lavished upon this stray youngster from the outlaw band. In a fashion more canine than equine he began to fol-

low his young protectress about the yard. Soon he was always at her heels, trespassing even into the ranch-house when his way was not barred. When corralled, on occasions of such of her trips away from home as were too much for his strength, he "cantankerred" like a spoiled child.

The selection of a suitable name for him became the concern of every member of the outfit. The Christian glossary "for males" in the back of the dictionary was consulted and its suggestions debated, from Aaron to Zephaniah. The *World Almanac*, the *Treasury of Facts* and other such accessible reference tomes were thumbed without avail. Through months of animated coltship into magnificent young horsehood the beast passed unnamed, answering to any and all endearing experiments which his mistress might be trying out.

There came the day when, just as Mary Ellen, lady-cook of the home ranch, was beating the triangle for "grub-pile" and all the outfit was gathering upon the porch, Gloriana raced into the yard to offer proof of her latest feat of "busting," her banner of red hair flowing behind her in the wind.

"Bless me if they don't look like—. They sure *are* some conflagration!" exclaimed her father pridefully. "It needed Glory's brand of grit to



bust a critter foaled like that Streak colt, and you can bet your *alce* on that!"

"*Conflagration?* At last you've hit on the name for him, boss!"

Then and there the young horse had been formally christened by the sousing of a bottle of near-beer upon his foretop, while Mary Ellen O'Grady had fumed over the supper growing cold in the mess-shack.

A glance ahead, as they now topped a rise and dipped toward the ford of "Lost-and-Found," quickened their pace. Some auto-tourist party appeared to have come to grief in the quicksands of the stream which here came up for air and ran like a regular water-course, only to return to subterranean flow a few miles south.

The nearer view showed the vehicle in distress to be a motor-truck which had left the hardpan crossing and come to a period in midstream. When one of the two men aboard left the driver's seat, climbed over the load and seemed about to attempt wading ashore, Gloriana felt impelled to warn him.

"Hold up, stranger!" she shouted, cupping her hands trumpetwise. "Wait till your hurry's over. Haven't you got all the time there is?"

## CHAPTER II

### THE SIGN-POST MAN

At the bank, before dismounting, she surveyed the situation.

The foreground included the squatted figure of "Always Busy," an old Apache whose dominant characteristic was contradicted by his name. At ease, with lackadaisical gaze upon the bogged machine, he sat upon his haunches—a misnamed mystery, this buck, because, although he never worked, he usually had money to spend.

As the stranger seemed minded to heed her warning, Gloriana spared a quieter greeting for the Indian.

"Hello, Busy-bee. Living up to your rep as per usual, I see."

"Ugh!" His grunt was doubtless intended for "Certainly." Busy was always most dignified in his idleness.

"Left your helping hand back in the teepee with your squaw, eh?"

"Ugh!" This time he embellished the gut-

tural with an expressive shrug and the comment: "White man dam' fool, Missey Gloryfrazee!" His unsleeved arm flung a gesture of scorn toward the truck.

The girl's glance of appraisal settled upon the stranger so characterized. He stood on the tail of the machine—erect, lean, intent. Even at the distance she could see that his features were massed for other effect than beauty. There was a straightness to the line of his mouth and an obstinate set to his shaved jaw which she noted as if from recognition, although certain she never had seen him before.

Whom did he resemble?

Across the rippling yards between them, her frown put the question. At once it was forgotten, however, in her displeasure at notice of his clothes.

"So?" ran her mental comment. "The gent I'm delegated by circumstance to help is *that* sort—the putteed-knickered-belt-coated-Panama-hatted sort! He sure looks a raw Easterner, of the breed that never measures up."

As if the fact that he drove one of her pet abominations wasn't enough! Motor-cars might be excused in cow-persons such as— Well, they were all right as playthings for young Philip

Strong, of the neighboring Emerald Ranch. But for horse people—

With a shake Gloriana doffed her inclination to tell the stranger exactly what she thought of him while he was in her power.

Just there the Lost-and-Found was a monster, limpid though it looked. Men, horses and unnumbered cattle had been gulped by its greed. The floor area of the truck kept that from being drawn under, but a wading human would not have a chance.

“You advise me to stay here?” The man’s lifted tone, as well as his expression, was rueful. “Tedious prospect, that. Couldn’t you throw out a pontoon bridge?”

At his somewhat frivolous suggestion Gloriana sniffed.

“I’m not up to bridge-throwing, but I’ll fling you my string and tow you ashore.”

Forthwith she unfastened the horse-hair riata from her saddle-horn and limbered its supple stands. With a free-arm movement that bespoke the control of hard muscles underneath, she circled the noose several times about her head. Suddenly, before you would have imagined that it could gain such force, it shot forward and fell about the stranger’s shoulders.

"Bravo!" applauded the older person who still sat behind the steering-wheel.

"Likely I'm not the first man you've roped," was the comment of him she had caught.

Gloriana ignored the general admiration, even that of Always Busy, who hugged himself, swayed and grunted as delightedly as though he had performed the feat himself. She made his participation more active by ordering him upon his feet to act as anchor at the slack end of the rope. Instructing the cheerful blunderer to fasten the loop under his armpits, then lengthen himself into the stream, she laid hold of the lariat. Her salvage proved a more considerable weight than she had judged, but not too much more, either for the "string" or her own strength. Soon she dragged him over the dangerous sink.

As he climbed the bank, his tenderfoot garb dripping, his fingers at work loosening the noose, she saw that his eyes were a rather lightish blue, with what looked a sort of veil over them. They were well-set beneath a high forehead, their paleness accented by their very dark lashes and brows. When he removed his misshapen Panama to speak to her, his hair showed to be brown, thick and of an ungraceful stiffness above his right temple, probably from a cowlick.

"Miss or madam, I thank you," said he elaborately, but with a quaver in his voice that sounded more like amusement than the deeper emotion of gratitude. "As a saver of human life, as a fisher of a decidedly appreciative fish, you are a success. If you could only have landed me with one quick jerk, though, as I've seen done with trout, I needn't have wet my clothes."

A surge of indignation caught her as she watched him squeeze the tails of his Norfolk and pull out to the sun-rays the unspeakable outlines of his knickerbockers.

But Gloriana Frazer had learned to discipline herself. With polite calm, she responded:

"If you'd had presence of mind enough, you might have left your pretty jacket on the truck. And if you'd been driving cayuses instead of a motor-truck, their instinct of protecting themselves, if not you, would have kept them from entering a swallow-all like the Lost-and-Found, no matter how hard you insisted. But you can't expect gasoline to have horse-sense, any which way."

"I've met a horse or two myself in my day, but—"

The laugh with which he had started ended abruptly. The most familiar feature of his face—his jaw—set in stern lines.



"Young lady, it is unpatriotic of you to criticise me or my conveyance."

"Unpatriotic?"

"Yes. You see, the government has approved me and the motor-truck."

"The—the *government*?"

"Allow me to introduce ourselves. I have the honor of being Seth Gilson, of the United States Geological Survey, in your midst on desert duty. Whilst yonder"— With something of a flourish he waved toward his companion. "The gentleman on the truck may look to you like a mere representation of patience on a monument. As a matter of fact, he is no less a celebrity than Alonzo Funk, my assistant, said to be more intimately acquainted with Forty-Mile Desert and Death Valley than any other man extant."

Making a megaphone of his hands, he advised:

"Off with your hat, 'Lonzo; look pleasant; bow. Even though marooned, show that you have some effete manners."

All the severity disappeared from Gloriana's face as she watched these instructions obeyed; saw a head of beautiful, moon-silvery hair uncovered to the sunlight; tried, although in vain, to distinguish the soft-spoken words of acknowledgment. She bowed pleasantly. For the sake of her father

she was always her pleasantest with older men.

"Well, for geologists," she observed to Seth Gilson, "you two haven't shown yourselves keen to quicksand! A hundred-foot gee to the right would have given you a hard-pan ford all the way across."

For just a second a gleam showed through the opacity of his eyes. One corner of his mouth twitched as he replied:

"But I have a good excuse; always make a point of having one or two handy in case of mistakes. A flock of horses or a covey or whatever you say—"

"A band," she corrected.

"Thanks so much. A band of what looked to be wild horses went tearing southward and diverted my caution. Since you, too, like horses—"

"Any excuse is better than none," she commented, with returning acerbity, in the pause of his tentative appeal.

"That's the idea!" He nodded cheerfully. "But the burning question of the moment is how to get that superwagon of mine ashore."

Already Gloriana had been giving the problem serious thought. Seth Gilson, even though so imposingly announced as of the U. S. Service, seemed

more or less helpless—considerably more, in fact, than less.

“I can’t, you know, go back and push it, after all the trouble you’ve had getting me out,” he pondered.

“Your load—heavy or light?”

“Compared to lighter things—heavy.” The circumspect answer was accompanied by a sigh. “Since you show an interest, we carry galvanized steel pipes, to be used as water sign-posts on the desert.”

She turned quickly and looked him over again, from Panama to puttees.

“So you—*you* are the sign-post man?”

Again he bared his head. More ceremoniously than before he bowed, his hat pressed against the sippy chest of his Norfolk.

“At last you really get me!”

Gloriana flushed. She was sure now that he was making sport of her. The stripes in her tawny eyes darkened as she lifted them to his and remarked, with a smile that somehow warned him against further levity in response:

“Would I need to be so bright ‘to get’ a sign-post man? Besides, we heard that you were coming. It’s to be hoped that you carry a ‘Stop,

Look, Listen!’ against quicksand, if other mushers are as slow to recognize it as you.”

But her small barb shunted off his amiable exterior. He answered with the concern of absolute sincerity:

“Unfortunately, Alonzo and I are equipped only to mark the desert water. However, I can have a special sign for quicksand executed on my return, if you think it advisable.”

“Oh, it’s not likely that the regular run of travelers will be dense enough to need it!” Again she took aim at him. “I was only thinking that if any more geological experts were to follow you—”

Instinctively artistic, Gloriana usually left something to the imagination of those she met in verbal combat. Her consideration veered now from the cause of the dilemma to the dilemma itself. She set her mind upon the problem of how best and quickest to help this helpless man.

The difficulties to be overcome likely would make her “best” essential. Her “quickest” was urged by the pawing impatience of Con to be off on their own affairs. It did seem all wrong that their day’s work and their supper must needs be postponed while they pulled out of the voracious creek-sands one Seth Gilson, one elderly assistant

and one gasoline conveyance. The remembrance that the last named was a truck loaded with government supplies proved an urge quite timely, in view of the fact that her gaze had returned to the puttees.

"Any block and tackle on your go-wagon?" she asked.

"Enough to catch all the fish that aren't in your Arizona deserts."

"Then I reckon I can yank you out. Oh, don't begin thanking me again! I'll help myself to what thanks I want in the joy of revenge."

"Revenge, Miss Young Lady—and against one whose only crime toward you is asking your advice?"

Her gaze lifted from his puttees to his face. "If it's for my entertainment that you keep frothing up that soft-soap, stranger, pray desist!"

He bowed with meekness quite too meek.

After a further moment of consideration, she gave her orders.

"Keep your assistant where he is. You mind my horse or—what's better—let him mind you. Me? The trail I'm going to take is entirely too *geological* for the company of anybody but Busy here."

She crossed to the squatting Indian; despite his guttural protests, shook him to his feet.

"You come along with missey, Always Never!" she commanded him.

With no further word of explanation, either to white man or red, she dug into a rough trail that led up the side of a bisecting ridge—a short-cut to her original destination.

Seth Gilson stood in a negligent position, staring after her, literally allowing Con to "mind" him. His eyes remained as vague as the hazes that obscured the secrets of the sky overhead. But the words he muttered, once she was out of sight, although not loud enough possibly to have been intended either for his assistant or the horse, had some force.

"Roped—and at first throw!"



## CHAPTER III

### TWENTY-MULE POWER

MORE than that help-the-stranger spirit which has vitalized so many lonely hearts in the West, speeded Gloriana Frazer up the cut-off trail and across the ridge to the acres of the ranch her father called "Blaze," after his own nickname. Nor could her resentment of Seth Gilson, of his sanguinity, his clothes, or his bogged conveyance, detract from her satisfaction on first sight of her grazing mule herd. The fact that he was the sign-post man, entrusted with the duty of making the deserts safe to thirsty travelers, warranted any possible effort to aid him.

Within the week, on an evening when she and her father had sat together in the cool of the porch, she had been told what the United States Survey was about to undertake in their region.

"Heard to-day that they're going to scatter dig-down posts over the Solemncholy Desert," he had said, with feeling in his voice that over-weighted the topic. "Just to think what fifteen feet of

light digging would have saved! The signs come a few years too late to help us, Glory-girl, but we sure can rejoice for those they're calculated to save to-morrow and the next day."

To Gloriana, as to many another inhabitant of the desert fringes, the Solemncholy was the darkest spot on the map of Arizona. Its seeming drought had claimed her mother to a terrible death from thirst four years previous—and all because none of the party with which the little lady had been traveling homeward from a visit to an ailing relative on the other rim had been desert-wise to the fact that springs of pure water lay hidden only a few feet beneath their blistered soles.

That truck in the sink of the Lost-and-Found was laden with sign-posts which, when properly placed, might prevent other such tragedies. Unworthy the memory of her mother she would have felt had she left anything undone to speed the mission of the putteed stranger.

These sentiments she did not detail to the Indian, so ironically named. No more did Always Busy detail to himself why he followed the pace set over the rocky spur and down into the bottom where the wild red-top waved. He was afraid of the girl's father, who had a way of "blazing" out at peaceful folks, but he did not necessarily obey

him. He was not afraid of her, yet he would exert himself unconstitutionally toward the fulfillment of her most exacting demands. *Quien sabe?*

Locating the bell mare, a flea-bitten white that had outlived other usefulness, Gloriana soon had the hybrids—browns and blacks that wore her personal brand upon their short-haired hips—within the training corral. Twenty of the most colorful, picked *mula de carga* every one as beneficiaries of her particular tutelage, lined up at her whistled signal. The Apache she asked to help adjust the trail harness which would give them to understand that work was expected of them.

Ten minutes saw the animals equipped. In response to her sharp "*Anda! Anda!*" they trotted over the trail after the buck. The girl herself brought up in the rear to guard against possible truancy.

Over a course which would have been dangerous for most horses, the thin-legged, dainty-hoofed creatures proceeded with a carelessness which only seemed to be. Their big ears beat time to the march in a sort of goose-step. Their only load was such lengths of rope as the girl had been able to gather at the corral.

A welcoming shout from Seth Gilson greeted their appearance over the ridge. Alonzo Funk,

still marooned midstream, arose from the front seat of the truck and stared his amazement.

"A twenty-mule-power wonder you're about to work before our very eyes, Miss—Miss Miracle," commented the surveyor, when she had come near enough for speech.

"Not Miss Miracle," corrected Gloriana, wondering how he could have mistaken her for her friend Philomena, who was a decided brunette and buxom to a degree. "She's retired from the range to preside over the bar of Eddie Bristo's 'Oasis' up in Rabbit Ear. Gloriana Frazer is the name I answer to, and I'm not aiming to be any wonder-worker, either. We'll leave that to the mules."

As though from success at some ruse, a smile drew down the nigh corner of the stranger's mouth. Through the veil over his blue eyes shone admiration as frank, if not as soulful, as ever had been focussed upon her from the handsomer, darker eyes of her particular, regional swain.

"You can scarcely blame me for thinking you a promising member of the Miracle family when—presto, chango—you disappear among the rocks and return with a fully equipped pack-train," insisted he. "What next?"

"Next" proved to be the recovery of the block

and tackle from the truck. Without further dignifying the Gilson persiflage, Gloriana flung her rope to Funk with equally well-aimed instructions.

Soon she drew to the bank the pulley-aid through which she meant to apply her mule power. With Gilson's help this was fastened to a convenient cottonwood, the beasts were formed tandem and drawing lines were strung to the truck.

There ensued a tense moment after she had started the elongated pressure by a word of Spanish command. Would the ropes stand the strain? Would the suction of the sand or her twenty-mule power prove the stronger? All faces asked the questions except that of the Apache. His constitutional indifference to "pale" troubles had returned him to his favorite seat.

In their grass collars the mules pressed forward, dug their hoofs into the soil, pulled as one. The ropes turned in twisting protest, but were too well made to fray. Sucking sounds came from the stream. The truck, with its cargo of desert life-preservers, began to move, although at first so reluctantly as to leave the issue still in doubt. Under the soft encouragement of their trainer, which was contrary to all prescribed rules for hectoring hybrids, the twenty dug deeper into the earth, strained harder upon their breast-bands.

The movement of the truck became more definite; the suction lessened; in the end the heavy load was drawn out upon the bank.

His slouch hat in hand, Alonzo Funk came forward to be presented at closer range to his rescuer and to express his gratitude. A sort of quiet that blanketed his features caught the girl's attention. Was it the tranquillity of long study of rocks, she wondered, or the reflex from those deserts he was reputed to know so well—deserts listless and cruel as a sleeping sea?

"I am both ashamed and glad of our late predicament," he began in a voice almost lazy in its deliberation. "The shame is for our carelessness in driving into such an evident trap; the joy is over making your acquaintance, Miss Frazer, even though your efficiency rather shatters my preconceived ideas of the supremacy of the male. Allow me to thank you."

His bow was courtly—quite out of keeping with his rough garb, his carelessly trimmed beard and unkempt hair.

"Don't thank me," deprecated Gloriana. "Thank the mules. I am going to live on hereabouts and may some day benefit from the water signs you mean to spread around Solemncholy Desert. So, you see, I have a selfish motive in



helping. My mules haven't. Lacking ulterior motive in any service rendered, they're entitled to such credit as is."

The old man bowed again, this time toward the band.

"Consider yourselves thanked for once being stubborn in a worthy cause," he saluted them, then promptly returned his quiet gaze to Gloriana. "Permit me, at least, to express my appreciation of the sight of you in action. With the ultimate fate of us all so assuredly near, one's pleasure in the beautiful grows."

The girl was distracted from her embarrassment at the direct compliment by the look of unutterable gloom which, with his words, had shadowed the geologist's weathered face.

"Our ultimate fate?" she asked.

"Possibly you don't know that the earth is drying up," was the morose return. "Yes, ma'am, there's no disputing the fact. This planet on which we dwell is destined to become like the moon. Its surface waters absorbed within, its very oceans dried up, it will be a dead orb, traveling through future ages, tenantless, about the sun."

"But not in your time or Miss Frazer's," put in Gilson, with what seemed characteristic cheer.

"If you ask for proof"—the assistant continued his hobby riding—"look out over your own Solemncholy yonder. The deserts are rapidly, steadily spreading over the earth. Already we Americans have lost one-fifth of our territory. Our ultimate fate assured? I should say it is!"

Gilson's laugh—which Gloriana privately decided she liked best of anything she had noticed about him—rang out. "Your ultimate, 'Lonzo, will become decidedly more so if you don't get busy drying out that motor and making Hercules again mobile."

He waved toward the truck.

With another profound bow for the girl, the old man turned to his task. Gloriana deserted her English in some instructions to Always Busy regarding the return of the mules to their range.

"Friend Funk is a bit pessimistic," said the surveyor when she rejoined him. "But on the desert he's never out of tone with the landscape. That, you see, makes him the best sort of a companion."

"Of course he's all wrong, isn't he, about the earth drying up and turning into a second-rate moon?"

"Centuries hence his forebodings will doubtless come true—yes, Miss Young Lady. Meantime we have started upon a campaign to check desert

encroachment, to make the wastes safe and habitable for man and his woman. The planning of this is part of my work out here and the Solemn-choly of your own front yard is my latest assignment."

They approached the truck, where he lifted the canvas that she might examine the load she had helped to salvage. The "posts" were galvanized steel pipes, two inches in diameter and twelve feet long. The water-signs which they would eventually carry were also of steel, enameled in white lettering upon a dark-blue background.

Bitterly Gloriana thought of what an earlier marking of the desert might have meant to her. But of this she did not speak. Instead, true to her West, she offered an invitation that Gilson and his wet-blanket companion accept the hospitality of her father at Blaze Ranch on their return.

"You're from the East, aren't you, Mr. Young Man?"

This was the one gibe she allowed herself—and only after her invitation had been provisionally accepted and she was again astride Conflagration.

"Washington, District of Columbia, is my headquarters, but—"

"Don't apologize. *Somebody's* got to live back

East," she interrupted. "Come to see us when you're through tagging the desert. You haven't horses to feed, but Hercules may be thirsty for gasoline and we keep some always on hand—to run the pump."

Gilson checked her departure with a reminder.

"You spoke of revenge; might I be told just where that enters in?"

"Through the mules." This time *she* laughed—and at him. But still he looked puzzled.

"Must I draw a diagram?" she asked. "When the motor craze honked over the country it looked as though we horse folks were doomed to become also-rans. A world war was necessary to re-establish our importance in the big scheme of things. But there's still sweet revenge in finding an auto in trouble and yanking it out with mule-power. Much obliged for to-day's contribution."

"Don't mention it," he returned as she started her horse.

He was left wondering whether or not she had heard his addendum: "Sweet revenge—I'll come back, Miss Frazer, for some of that of my own."

Fortunately he did not care. The promise was made to himself. His mind was settled on that point. He certainly would come back.

## CHAPTER IV

### TOKENS FROM BEYOND

GLORIANA FRAZER's homeward pace, one mid-afternoon nearly a week subsequent to her tussle with the sands of the Lost-and-Found, was easy. Her horse dictated that it should be a cow-trot, seeming to realize from the lax pressure of his loved rider's knees that, although the afternoon was but half spent, she must be tired. And, indeed, she was.

Before daybreak she had been in the saddle, as on so many days since the last labor raid of their neighbor and enemy, Philip Strong, Sr. When the one remaining wrangler of their outfit had fallen to the bribe of wages which her father could not pay and privileges which he would not grant, her own ranch duties had multiplied.

No longer were the mules, her especial property, the heaviest responsibility of her rides afield. The several Frazer horse-bands, all sorrel or bay and segregated as to ages, required constant attention, which meant a daily tour of many miles.

Although her father undertook as much of the inspection and care as one man well could, there remained a constant strain upon the daughter brought up much as a son would have been. Fortunately, the past activity of the rangers and the distance which lay between Blaze ranch and the international line to the south made close-herding against rustlers unnecessary. Otherwise the two could not have put through a work which, under ordinary conditions, would have been divided among four or five punchers.

The care of the colts and their dams had been apportioned to Mary Ellen O'Grady. That the bounteous-built spinster need not neglect the cook-shack which was her particular domain, the mares had been pastured as near the ranch-house as possible and a buckboard provided for her to-and-fro trips to the colts. Here should be inserted, with all delicacy due, the fact that Miss O'Grady was physically beyond mounting a horse without the aid of a derrick or, at least, the boost of several of their erstwhile "hands."

As the season advanced, outside help would become absolutely necessary. That was the text of Gloriana's fear to-day—fear lest, should they be forced to employ vaqueros, the chief of Blaze Ranch traditions be shattered. Her father still



hoped to recruit several old wranglers of past friendship, who might be counted upon to withstand Strong's efforts to cripple them, and to these had written most persuasively. Only one of the letters had been answered, and that unsatisfactorily. That the others would ever reach the veteran rovers seemed to the girl highly problematical.

From a vantage-point on the home trail she had a view into Emerald Basin, the ranch-hold of her father's enemy, known as the "Silver Fox." Down there fully a dozen punchers were driving toward one of the big corrals a bunch of bald-faced Herfords which three easily might have handled. The ache that had settled between her shoulders gave acuteness to her envy of such an overplus of man-power.

Momentarily the girl's eyes rested upon the low concrete house whose yellow-tinted walls and red-tile roof showed effectively against the green background of the farther slope. A veritable palace of dreams with which the youthful imagination might conjure, this structure had superadded importance as the home of Strong, Junior—splendid-looking, hot-headed, flame-hearted "Phil," a youth who had personified to Gloriana since her childhood the idea of romance. Because of the

long-standing feud between her father and his, she never had been inside the house—never, in fact, met the son except by chance, either on the trail or at the homes of mutual friends in town. Despite his protests against such a quixotic restriction to the growth of the attraction between them, she remained too loyal to her “big pard” to make secret appointments with him.

From general report after the barbecue and dance which had warmed this “show” house of the range, she knew the luxury of its high-ceilinged rooms, the combined art and comfort of its tiled patio with splashing fountain. The elder Strong was as successful as shrewd—that she had to admit, loyally as she tried to share in the Frazer antipathy, to the original cause of which she never had been able to penetrate.

Disillusionment was inevitable as she turned her eyes ahead toward her own home, certainly rough in comparison. There no changes had been made since the arid soul of the desert had called the wife and mother unto itself. The “real” house with which Blaze Frazer had planned to replace the cabin to which he had brought his bride in the happy long-ago did not seem worth the building, with only two of them left, and two who spent most of their time in the open. Be-

sides, the money therefor never seemed to be at hand.

A certain parental plunge into politics by way of distraction—when the old fire-eater had been temporarily quenched by the naturalized Mexican vote going solidly for his opponent—had been costly. Moreover, there was his “bad habit,” the affixing of his John Hancock to the promissory notes of impecunious friends. These notes the elder Strong often shaved to profit, while Frazer usually suffered the loss of having to pay them on the default of the makers.

At the barn, a welcoming whinny from Flame foretold her father’s return from Rabbit Ear, their railroad town, earlier than she could have hoped. After providing for the comfort of Con, Gloriana hurried toward the ranch-house.

The room she entered was large and log-raftered, its in-between boards whitewashed, its walls artistically panelled with sacking. Game heads and Indian curios were dispersed with some decorative effect and the floor cracks were softened by several skin rugs. Cushions blended colors on the chairs and divan, lending that suggestion of luxury almost inevitable where a woman presides. A soft-shaded lamp stood upon the center-table, surrounded by books and

magazines which told of her indoor tastes. The soul of the room, however, was the fireplace—of a character, with its wide mouth, low mantel and ingle seats, that encouraged comfort, confidences, congeniality.

Into this main apartment of her home, she who had ruled there since her sixteenth year stepped softly, in case her parent might be snatching a nap after his long ride. Instead, he stood with his back toward the door, facing a portrait of the lost wife, whose memory remained the livest light of his soul. A fair likeness it was, suggesting his "Marge" as she had looked in her prime, dainty, sweet and vividly brunette, with one of the red roses which she was said to have resembled clasped against her breast.

Although Gloriana had stopped just within the door and waited, Blaze seemed to feel her presence. At once he turned about and faced her, a sinewy giant, unbent by the years which had grizzled the still-plentiful auburn thatch whence had come his sobriquet. One glance at his bearded, weathered face told her that he was restraining some excitement.

With quick steps she crossed to him.

"Aren't you home earlier than you expected?" she asked.

As he did not reply, just stood there looking at her with that strained, unusual expression, she put another question with what ease she might: "Well, old hoss, what's on your mind besides your mane?"

Taking one of her hands with a strong pressure, he led her toward the ingle seat. "Do you remember the color of that veil Margie tied around her hat the day when she—when she left us?"

The girl cast a sidewise look at him.

"As if you didn't remember, too! Was there anything about her—what she wore, how she smiled, every word she said—that we haven't discussed over and over again?"

"Yes, yes, Glory-girl; but my memory don't seem as good as it was. Was there anything particular about the veil she wore that day?"

More surprised than before, Gloriana detailed: "It was the color of roses and extra thick, as her skin always suffered so from the desert dust. And on one hem of it I had perpetrated my most ambitious bit of embroidery as a going-away surprise—her initials, embellished by some forget-me-nots that likely wouldn't have wanted anybody to remember them."

"Did it look anything like—*like this?*"

Still holding her one hand, Blaze withdrew the other from his pocket and stretched toward her a

folded piece of material—"extra thick" chiffon and the color of ash roses, the hem embroidered with faded blue flowers twined through a lattice-work formed of the initials M. B. F.

Gloriana seized it, examined it closely, smothered a hard-suppressed sob into its softness.

"Dad!" she exclaimed, scarce above her breath. "Where? How?"

As her hands lowered there sounded a faint metallic click upon the hearth. This she did not notice in the upsurge of her mother-longing, but Blaze swooped after what had fallen from the veil. As he straightened he looked into his daughter's face with an expression she never had seen in his eyes before.

"Glory," he said, in a voice which further agitated her because so subdued, "all may not be over with the littlest pardner. There is a chance that she still lives, that we may find her. Look at this!"

He held out for her inspection that which had clicked upon the hearth—a bracelet so small that it looked to belong to some child, wrought of hammered silver.

As the girl examined the trinket she remembered well the day Blaze had had it fastened about her mother's tiny wrist by a Navaho silversmith,



with the idea that it should never be removed. At sight of it, hope died within her.

"But, but—" She faltered over the cruel suggestion. "If some one found this on the desert and gave it to you, it would mean that— Oh, don't you remember, Daddy-Blaze, that she never could slip it over her hand?"

"I had the Indian put it there with a prayer for luck, and I've got a hunch that prayer's going to be answered yet. Marge must a-been mighty sick, mighty thin before this could have come off her wrist. But that don't necessarily mean that she—that she— Get a grip on yourself, my girl, while I tell you how I came by these things. Here, read for yourself the letter that was with them."

"You mean you got them—"

"In the mail, yes. Handed to me by Em Walton at the Rabbit Ear post-office first thing when I 'lighted there to-day."

His eyes agleam, voice exultant, hand shaking, he passed her a soiled sheet of paper, written over with irregular, pencil-printed letters. Now as stirred as he, Gloriana lifted it to the light. It was dated ten days before from Nogales, Mexico, and read in full:

SEÑOR:

Woman here with us now four years may be relation with you. We find her desert loco. Long time she knew not much. Some time she cry for Blaze and Glory. We not understand. Now she say her name is Frazer. We make inquiries and hear about you. If you have lose your woman, better come look at this one found. No reward is expect but the expenses she have cost us—five thousand gold.

Bring it yourself to San Ignacio, Señora Estate, Mex. Rep. There you visit all pulque shops. Ask in each one for José el Toro. Nobody can tell you about him it seem. But be not discourage. Somebody will learn by your askings who you are, and direction to rancheria will be furnish to you. No word of this to Americano counsel or to rurales is our warning.

As evidence of our respected esteem, señor, we send you amulet from wrist of woman, also garment token of recognition.

There was no signature.

When Gloriana glanced up, her resemblance to her father was more than usually striking. No need for her to ask what his response would be; no need for him to ask whether she approved. Despite the anonymous authorship of the message, the money hold-up, the covert threat of its warning against appeal to the authorities— All this counted for nothing by common consent in view of the possibility of ultimate, priceless reward.

The virile look upon both faces—the wind-burned, time-creased old one and fair, flushed younger—the fire-gleam in the two pairs of topaz eyes, foretold that there would be no argument over their response.

“I’ll catch that early train south in the morning,” said he. “I’ve raised the five thousand by cleaning out our bank and borrowing back some I’d lent to our friends.”

Gloriana stood with palms pressed upon her thighs and fingers gripping the seams of her riding trousers.

“God help you split the scenery!” she breathed.

It was characteristic of the man-to-man attitude of the two so much alike that neither missed the embrace or kiss which, with another father and daughter, would have been a natural expression. The girl did, however, offer her hand for a “shake,” nor winced under the physical twinge of his return.

“Someway,” she promised, “I’ll keep the horses grazing. I’ll do my bit to help matters along.”

For the first time uneasiness entered the manner of Blaze. Emphatically he shook his head.

## CHAPTER V

### THE REBEL SPARK

ALWAYS had Gloriana Frazer been a dutiful daughter—except when she considered that she had good and sufficient reasons for being otherwise. Her father's postponement of the naming of his objection to her riding range alone was in honor of this commendable characteristic.

Taking down the wall map, Blaze began to trace his route. He would take the rattler east to Tucson and change there for a south-bound local to the international boundary at Nogales, he declared. If Mexican trains were running, which was always doubtful, he could continue by rail to the San Ignacio appointed in the letter, where he was to put his mysterious inquiry among the pulque shops.

But from San Ignacio—where? Not a hint was disclosed as to which way those "directions to rancheria" would lead him. That the little hostage had been sequestered in some remote place

unfrequented by Americans for the obtainment of the ransom named for her restoration was a logical surmise. Otherwise rumors might have been started which, considering the wide regional knowledge of their loss, would likely have reached their ears. But they had not even a compass point of speculation. The human caché might be back in the Sierra de Pinitos to the eastward or in the opposite direction over the Rio de Altar way. Indeed, San Ignacio might prove to be only a stop-over along an extended journey into the Republic of Trouble.

The secretive, hand-printed missive made one thing plain: that the "samaritans"—neither of the Frazers could think of their informants in harsher terms, any more than they could prefix the "good" that usually accompanies the allusion—had reasons of their own for conducting negotiations with the greatest caution. Beyond that, they soon agreed that they could not and need not go.

Together father and daughter folded the veil of faded rose chiffon; laid in it the silver circlet whose small circumference enclosed so much that was significant. Then Blaze wrapped around them and the letter the paper covering in which they had been mailed to him.

"I'll leave these with you, my girl, just to re-

mind you, in case you miss your old dad, why he went away. But it's best to keep it our secret—until we know.”

With the words he crossed the room and tucked the packet into a pigeonhole of her desk.

Gloriana made a creditable attempt at a laugh of cheer. “I’ll miss you—if I find time,” she said. “But I won’t be any lady of leisure if I keep the gearing of this horse ranch oiled. What with that five thousand and your expenses to pay, we’ll need a record clean-up on the market band. Not that you’re to think of money in taking care of—of her, after you’ve redeemed her. Doctors, if she needs them, nurses, food, clothes—everything of the best that is! And we’ll want to build the real house, won’t we, just as soon as we can make the raffle—a kind of temple consecrated to our gratitude?”

Absorbed in the premature plans which will come at such epochs, she did not notice how the veteran’s shoulders had lifted as he turned to her, how his face had stiffened as if in preparation for some contest.

“Glory,” he began gravely, “I sloped along all those by-trails before I left town. There wasn’t time to come home and consult with you first, so I—well, I just arranged for everything.”



His hesitant, almost apologetic tone caught her attention. She gazed up at him, waiting for answer to the questions which raced, unput, through her mind.

What arrangements had he thought necessary to make in town that were not already down in black and white? Their horses of marketable age—those beautiful, sleek-coated sorrels and bays bred for cavalry service—weren't they good as sold? The day had been appointed, a month hence, for the arrival of the army remount officers to make the inspection that would precede government branding, so why suggest a change of program? Even the mules, upon whose training she had lavished all the skill that had come to her as a birthright—had not they, as well, been bargained for?

The lapsing silence alarmed her.

"Elucidate," she suggested crisply.

Blaze gulped hard, then obeyed in a voice rapid and unctuous for him.

"I've decided to lease the ranch for three years—feel plumb sure you'll see that it's best all round, once you get used to the idea. We'll sell the horses and mules outright, except for Con and Flame. I had an offer that's mighty fair, considering the rush we're in, not a half-hour after I let

out that I'd got to go to Mexico. This will give us cash-in-hand for those expenses you were mentioning. After the three years are up— Say, my girl, don't you reckon we kind of owe it to Marge to let her decide what she wants to do and where she wants to live? It's likely, ain't it, after all the horror she's been through, that she might hanker to get far away from the desert-edge? She's the one that ought to decide about the real house. Don't you think we owe that much to her?"

Gloriana had risen to her feet during this unwontedly lengthy speech. Because every fiber of her mind and body strained for an expression of vehement denial, she took herself in hand.

"And what becomes of me?" she asked quietly. "Am I chucked in with the deal?"

"I worked that out, too. You'd best go up to Phoenix and hole-in with your Aunt Sarah until— until after *we* get back. I'll bring Marge straight there. Meantime, you see, I won't be nagged to death worrying about you. And on your part, you won't find life dull among all your old school-mates."

Privately Gloriana compared certain half-formed, ambitious plans which she had meant to work out on her native range with the parent-

made one staged inside that vine-covered cottage of the capital city. Her conclusions were not expressed, except, perhaps, in the squaring of her jaw.

"You speak of an offer—a deal? Who made it?"

"Timothy Rudd, of the Eureka Feed and Sale Stables. He came to the bat the moment I said I'd sell out our stock." Blaze made the announcement with the reluctance of a pedro player leading a doubtful card.

To the girl the name was a culminative blow.

"You've arranged to sell our stock to—to *Timothy Rudd*?"

The indignation of her protest was no surprise to Blaze. Even to himself it had seemed a desecration that an outsider like the dapper feed-stable man, so recently from Missouri that his reason for leaving his native State had not yet caught up with him, should settle on their home ranch even as a tenant. The place would never seem the same again when they took it back, if ever they did. As for the stock—

But Gloriana was voicing their common thought: "I don't burr to his way with horses any more than our reds will. Oh, dad, if it was anybody but Rudd!"

The grey brows of the veteran drew down. "His system is fuller of deuces than aces, for sure. But who else was there for me to dicker with? He was right on the job and nobody else was. He's got the mazuma, and he ain't been here long enough to mind hiring greasers, so the labor shortage won't bother him none. We'll have to let her go as she lies."

A moment Gloriana gave up to urgent calculation. For long her father had called her "pardner," and in the past generally had consulted her. In view of a decision which she had reached before hearing of this catastrophe, to which she knew she never would become reconciled, she felt the right to speak her mind.

"Have you signed up with Rudd?" she began. "Has the money passed hands?"

"Not yet, child; but—"

"Then give up the deal and let me run the ranch while you're gone. I'm not afraid of the work and I can surely get some one to help out with the riding, because of the emergency. Mary Ellen will stick—we can count on her. And you needn't worry about my handling the inspection. I simply know there isn't a spot in the wide world that mother would rather be brought back to than old Blaze Ranch. Why, dad, it was her *home*—

and home to a woman of her sort means more than a man ever could understand. She'll become her real self quicker and surer here than—"

"I thought of that, too," he interrupted, the troubled look of his face deepening. "Your offer is just what I expected—brave and unselfish. But it's too brave and too unselfish for me to accept. And I know Marge wouldn't want me to. No telling how long it will take to deal with these mañana Mexicans. The five thousand may be only a starter, and, no matter what the price, I'm not coming back without her. Even if you did succeed in hiring a puncher or two up at the Ear, you couldn't keep 'em. That hell-fiend over in the basin would run 'em off on you. Even if they stuck, Strong, Sr., would find some other way of making trouble for you, for there ain't a decent corpuscle in his blood. Fighting a girl would just suit him."

"You've often said I was as good as two men. Were you flattering me, dad, or have I lost your confidence?"

"*You* lose my confidence? Say, you'll take that back after you've glimmed through this document!"

From his pocket Blaze produced a paper of legal look and tendered it to her for his justification.

While she hastily read it through, he interjected soothing comment: "I reckon that lawyer paper shows how much my confidence has been lost in the one and only Glory-girl, eh? You needn't be afraid to trust your eyes—it's a power-of-attorney, all right, as absolute as the judge knew how to draw. Tim Rudd will ride out with you to-morrow after you've seen me off and make a stock tally which will determine the exact amount he's to pay over to you. He's to pay it straight to you, understand, and you're to sign all the necessary papers. That's how much confidence I've lost in you!"

But if he hoped that the paper and his words would distract her from the issue, he was doomed to disappointment. Rather, they seemed to point her complaint.

"Since you trust me enough to deal me one card, why not the whole hand?" she demanded. "If I'm up to holding my own against a natural-born shark like Rudd, why say I'm not up to playing the straight game of running the ranch?"

"Glory"—the old fellow faced her squarely, now as flushed as she—"there ain't no use your trying to razoo me."

"Razoo—me razoo *you*, Blaze?"

"Don't you reckon I know why you're so set



on sticking to the ranch? Do you think I'm blind to what every one else has seen—the truth about you and that yellow dog's whelp?"

The girl turned on the parent aroused by her insistence with equally flagrant signs of resentment.

"You can't call Phil Strong insulting names before me, dad, even if you do hate his father. And if you're not blind, as you say, you know there's nothing below the surface between Phil and me. I've put your wishes before my own—you know that."

"I do know it, and I ain't denying it. You've always played the game above the table—I'll say that for you. But why try to bluff me now?"

"Dad, you—"

He silenced her angry retort.

"It's because I wouldn't trust P. H. Strong, Sr., in the first place, or anybody with a drop of his sneaking blood in the second, that I won't consent to your staying here at their mercy. And I won't. That's plumb settled."

"You'd acknowledge yourself licked to everybody that knows us and P. H.?"

"And Phil, Jr. Don't you leave him out of it," Blaze added. "I'd take a bet that if it was nosed

around I'd left you here alone, he'd slope right over the line and be pestering you."

"That's enough, dad. You're sloping right over my feelings when you talk that way about somebody I've told you frankly is my friend."

"One hound of a friend!" The veteran blazed anew. "As for acknowledging I'm licked, I didn't expect you to be the first to throw that up to me. I ain't licked—never was. But I reckon I can quit fighting when it's to save my girl-child from—well, from them that ain't fit to clean her riding boots, if you insist on complimentary language."

Gloriana started as if to voice the fury which showed in her face; then turned, her lips set tight, her hands clinched, and walked across to the window. But when she realized that her father had followed, when she felt his great, heavy palm upon her shoulder and looked up to see that his love for her had quenched all the flames of his hate for another—

Her hand met his in a strong grip and she listened to his feeling plea:

"We mustn't have hard words, pardner, especially just at this time. I've never given you a command, and I ain't going to now. It's only for

your own good that I'm willing to quit the fight—to sacrifice the ranch. Don't you reckon if you'd take a little hike out into the fresh air you'd come to see it my way? Leastwise, won't you try to see it my way, Glory-girl?"

"I—I'll try, my Daddy-Blaze," she promised fervently.

"I'll be loading up for to-morrow's trip while you're gone. You won't fail to be back in good time for Mary Ellen's best-ever biscuits?"

"Don't you think you'll get to eat them all!"

With a fond laugh that falsely declared their difference forgot, she started out, but not to "hike." On Con's back she could best "think things out." There only could she "try" to change her mind.

## CHAPTER VI

### A LADY'S WHIM

IF Conflagration was surprised at the day's second call upon his services, he did not show it; indeed, he might have realized, from the pace set, that motion aided the human mental process. Too late in the day to seek her chief adviser, a local celebrity known as "Danny" Dunn, Gloriana turned toward that monster desert which could gulp so voraciously man's first treasure of life. Perhaps through the purple hazes which at this closing hour of the day were draped before its cruel mysteries, just beyond where spread its yellow-green border of greasewood, she might see answer to another cruel mystery.

After a few minutes' hard riding, she left the trail and blazed one of her own up the slope; finally drew rein in the shade of a palo verde which stood like a lookout on the last bluff before the rim of arid waste. How long she sat there, feeling, rather than thinking her problem, she did not calculate. She was startled when an alien

rasp cut through the velvet nature noises of the hour. The triumphant honking of a siren not altogether unfamiliar told her, a moment later, that she had been espied upon her height and followed—also told her mount, who began to express his irritation in action.

At once Philip Strong reduced the speed of his racing car, his expression most contrite.

"I beg a thousand pardons," he exclaimed on pulling up. With goggle-eyed cap in hand he leaned over the steering wheel toward the girl. "Had I remembered Connie's pet prejudice, I wouldn't have allowed my rubber-tired steed to whinny."

She avoided the intense look which accompanied his flippant words, and her response seemed somehow to reiterate the boy's resentment.

"Nothing wasted except a breath or two. But don't think I blame Con for acting loco. Your daffy buggy is about as quieting to him as a 'phobia skunk."

There ensued a brief pause in which like frowns from unlike reasons appeared upon the faces of the young couple regarding each other—his from disappointment at her ungracious reception, hers from realization of the very pleasure she felt in the meeting.

Certainly, she told herself, with a smile close behind the frown, any girl might be pleased to have so gallant a knight pursue her. Philip Strong, Jr., was undeniably handsome and likeable—dark of eyes, luxuriant and black of hair, regular of features, of a good height, and muscular. So urgent was the appeal of his form and fitness to the girl born to appreciation of physical perfection that she had taken of late to warning herself against it.

Equally hard to resist was his frank subjection to the fair neighbor's influence over him. That weakness—or strength—he made no effort to conceal, excuse or boast, either before her or their little world. Always had he simply recognized it, as he did other established conditions in his life.

In view of the strife waged between their respective parents, a bareheaded controversy of parts over ranch-hands, barbed-fences, water-holes—anything that could add rancor to that untraceable, long-ago cause of their mutual dislike—Gloriana had encouraged this predilection in the beginning as an aid toward the prevention of open hostilities. Later had come moments when she forgot just why it was so in the true girl's enjoyment of the fact that it *was* so.

That he should obtrude the influence of his



presence, however, just when she had sought solitude to make a decision which concerned him, seemed an unfair, if unintentional advantage seized in his own favor.

"I wish you wouldn't take your drives so near our place," she said, with the equivocal petulance she felt. "A blind gopher would get wise to what you're looking for."

"Have I ever said that fooling blind gophers was one of my ambitions? I've not broken my promise to keep outside your boundaries, have I? Further than that, I'm entitled to look for what I please."

"And I'm entitled to refuse to be looked at," she snapped, "so will you kindly toot-toot yourself along?"

"You don't mean that, Glory?"

His assurance had been short-lived.

"I sure do."

"*Why?*"

"Because if my dad should see me talking to you so near home, or hear of it, he'd think I had broken my word to him and met you by appointment."

"But when can I ever see you—to talk to you? Are you going to let your father's broil with mine

spoil all my happiness and—I hope—just a little of your own?”

“That’s exactly what I came here to think out, Phil; but I want to think it out alone.”

He shook his head and sighed.

“You’re the most different sort of girl in Arizona, Glory Frazer,” he said slowly. “Sometimes I wonder if you can be made of regular feminine material. I suppose a decent fellow has got to obey the whims of the lady he—”

“Then why don’t you?” she cut in.

“Why don’t I what?”

“Why don’t you slope, since I’ve made it more or less plain that that’s my latest whim?”

She threw back her head, her tiger-striped eyes mocking his dark ones. Con, too, seemed moved by exasperation; pawed the earth impatiently.

Even then young Strong did not obey. He sat gazing up at her, his face slowly reddening, his mouth moving as if in an effort to hold back indignant words.

“I guess you—you don’t quite mean—”

In his pause came a startling interruption. A man’s voice, keyed to a stressful bellow, waved up from somewhere below.

“Help! Mr. Strong—help—help!”

Both the young folks turned, listened to the reiterated cry, peered over the rim ahead. They saw trundling out of the desert, dust-grey as an alkali ghost, a large vehicle.

With her first long glance, Gloriana recognized the motor truck which her mules had dragged from the sink of the Lost-and-Found several days before. The driver was the sign-post man. Two other men were stretched upon the floor, neither of whom, however, looked to be the old geologist.

Evidently recognition of these passengers urged Philip's response to the appeal in his name.

"Under the circumstances, you won't mind excusing me a moment?" he asked with frank irony. "Somebody who appreciates my company more than you is in trouble down there."

He started the racer and circled back to the road.

After a moment's deliberation, Gloriana yielded to a natural curiosity. The combination of those desperate cries with the government surveyor's return seemed peculiar. Holding Con to a more or less casual pace, she followed to see what she might see.

When she reached the level, both drivers had left their steering-wheels and were in the main trail, facing each other, Seth Gilson in the negli-

gent attitude which had irritated her at first sight of him, Philip taut with some sort of determination. Her appearance upon the scene would have seemed to be quite unnoticed, except that Gilson shifted one vague glance in her direction, pulled the Panama off his head, shook the dust from it, then, after a moment, replaced it.

Phil was speaking in an aroused voice, his gesture recalling her attention to the truck's passengers. She could now plainly see that they were bound with ropes; that one was a roughly bearded white, the other a swarthy Mexican.

A few steps through the mesquite brought her near enough to distinguish the words of the colloquy.

"Do let me save you the responsibility, stranger," Seth Gilson was urging, but without stress. "The sheriff will be glad enough to see my catch where they belong."

"Which is at my place." Philip advanced a threatening step or two. "My name is Strong—son of the owner of Emerald Ranch. I can vouch for both your so-called prisoners, I tell you. You admit that you're not an officer, and that you have no warrant, so hand them over."

The geologist's smile expanded. "Not this happy afternoon."

“Now—immediately!”

The ring of command in Phil's voice thrilled the audience of one, even as his suddenly drawn automatic frightened her.

But neither thrill nor fright showed in the face of Gilson.

Gloriana started forward, then hesitated. Interference from her probably would relieve a situation taut with possibilities; but just in time a desire to see the two weigh out in combat clutched her.

Of the merits of the controversy, she knew nothing—at the moment cared as little. But she did want to know the quality of Phil's fighting spirit. So long and bitterly had she heard him maligned by her parent on account of transgressions entirely vicarious, that it would be a satisfaction, indeed, to see him prove himself. Also a satisfaction, although of less personal nature, would it be to see the cock-sure sign-post man crumple to obedience. She gripped the horn of her saddle, her impulse well under control.

The next few moments would have to take care of themselves.

## CHAPTER VII

### AT POINT OF GUN

THE curiosity with which Seth Gilson stood looking into the round-opened eye of the pistol leveled upon him was almost puerile in effect. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then advanced with an interested step.

Gloriana, now more frightened than thrilled by the show of fight in her handsome suitor, suddenly regretted her silent sanction of the scene. If only Philip were not so rash-headed—

At the human target's second step, of equal length and eagerness, she stifled a gasp. What could the greener mean, moving toward an aroused Arizonan as though they both were boys—the weapon that bore upon him nothing more dangerous than a pop-gun?

"Let's see the pea-shooter," she heard him ask when several feet nearer.

The fear in her was not for him—the man daring a violent death. If he chose to continue his taunts he deserved the consequences. Phil could



do nothing else than shoot. For his sake the issue was to be prevented, at any cost. She would have to save him from the Easterner's foolhardiness, since he could not, from his nature and upbringing, save himself.

She realized that she must not startle Philip by a sudden call—an automatic went off too easily for that. But she could—she *must* interfere. She slipped from her saddle. The next contribution of Gilson stopped her.

"Don't you feel that iron getting hot, son? Burned fingers hurt."

The distance between the two had grown dangerously short. Phil could scarcely miss, if he tried. Why didn't the surveyor realize that he was going too far? Surely the face opposite him was enraged enough for warning, the dark eyes sufficiently defiant.

But Gilson only chortled, the quality of genuine amusement in his voice adding insult to attempted injury.

"I just feel it in my bones that you're not going to shoot," he said. "How about you? Do you believe in hunches?"

"I do—and I've got a strong one that you're not to come one step nearer!"

Phil's warning issued through set teeth. The

hand that held the weapon raised slightly, then held steady. Hope came to the girl as Gilson seemed to hesitate, more impressed, evidently, by the iron in his opponent's voice than by the metal of his gun.

"It isn't possible," he contended, as if to himself and with a grin that looked foolish under the circumstances, "that all my perfectly good bones could be mistak—"

He broke off; his bluff of man unafraid evidently was called.

Gloriana took a deep breath of relief that, after all, she need not interfere. Better that Phil should win alone, and, by winning, impress this interloper with the fact that he possessed, not only his full share of bones, but the sinew to give them force. As she saw Gilson glance toward the truck, she concluded that he was about to give up the prisoners whom Philip wished freed. There would be no addition to the long list of desert casualties. A moment more and she would join her laughter with her young neighbor's at the near-tragedy which had been turned into farce.

But, although Gilson obeyed to the extent of not taking that final forbidden forward step, the duet she anticipated never was laughed.

With a flash of energy quicker than gun-fire he

swooped forward from the hips and straightened one of the long arms, a second before swinging so loosely from its socket, in an incredible reach. Steel-like fingers closed about Phil's wrist. The trigger, pressed a moment too late, sent an ineffective bullet skyward.

Strong, Jr., seemed too surprised by the suddenness of the stranger's initiative to struggle for the possession of his weapon. At least, it was to be assumed that surprise had allowed his complete disarmament. Gilson's hands now held the automatic, at which he stood looking, as if it were some curious geological specimen.

In a moment Gloriana saw him glance up at the man who had so recently attempted his life with that cheerful grin which had provoked her on the occasion of their former meeting.

"The thing isn't a revolver; but it will shoot, won't it?" he remarked, with a malapertness which she was coming to believe a trick.

"Damn you!"

At Philip's vehement curse, he at whom it was hurled squinted upward at the azure panoply of the desert, as though fearful that it might have torn a rent up there.

The girl's cheeks burned for her handsome friend with the eccentric's next move.

Reaching under that foppish-belted jacket of his, he drew a long-barreled revolver which, to her practised eye, could not have calibered less than .45.

To think that all the time he had been effectively armed and had made no attempt to draw! There was something fascinating about the way he played the game. Her eyes remained on him.

"Yours is the prettier gun," he admitted, wagging his head as he compared the two weapons.

She, too, compared them. Strange, the thought struck her, that the Easterner should be "toting" an Arizonan's best friend, the native son a more modern weapon which her father and his friends considered too "fancy" for anything except a woman's armament. But Phil's gun was just another of his affectations, commensurate with pasturing his thoroughbred saddler in favor of a motor car. No man was perfect—that she must remember.

"I like to hear a cylinder click, myself, when I'm shooting in earnest. As for a revolver—well, mine hasn't the bad habit of holding fire a split-second too long!"

Gilson made the comment in his chatty way just as Gloriana entered actively into the scene.

"What's the title of this movie that you two are rehearsing?" she asked.

"As I live—Miss Frazer!" exclaimed Gilson, pretending complete surprise.

Philip Strong looked his annoyance first at her, then at the man who had improved the opportunity to worst him before the all-important audience of one.

"You needn't bother introducing us," continued Gilson. "Miss Frazer and I are not exactly strangers. We've met before, and advantageously to myself, at least."

Young Strong's glance at once transferred for substantiation to the girl. He moistened his lips in a way he had when striving to control his inherited temper; the quiet with which he next spoke—and straight to her—was admirable.

"It is time both of us were taking the back trail. Will you come, Glory?"

His proprietary tone and the intimation that they had been keeping a tryst on the rim returned Gloriana's attention to their unfinished difference. For a minute she studied the plea of his eyes; looked considerably at the downward lagging sun; at Gilson and his two prisoners; back at Phil.

"It's not so late but what I can find the trail by myself. I'll be along directly, Phil, but you

needn't wait. Con and I never like to hold back for gasoline—you know that!"

She could see that, at last, her suitor was thoroughly angered. In one flash of thought she regretted her dismissal of him before the stranger who had dealt him so much of humiliation; in the next, she hoped that he would defy her wishes and force her to accompany him. Consternation filled her as, without a word, his face gone suddenly ash-pale, he climbed into the car, threw in the clutch and departed the scene.

For a moment the two left standing in the road stared after him, then at each other.

"What have you done with Mr. Funk?" Gloriana broke the silence with the first question that came to her lips.

"Alonzo? Oh, he's out in the shade of a water-barrel cactus, teaching a couple of horned-toads to play leap-frog by way of passing the time until I return from my visit to the sheriff."

"And these men that he—that Mr. Strong wanted you to hand over?"

Gilson's odd grin reappeared at mention of the two passengers.

"Mr. White-man-needing-a-shave—he who introduced me to Mr. Strong by yelling for help—happens to have a rather binding, previous



engagement with the United States Army. That's what drew me toward him out on the Solomncholy—made me kind of hanker for his company. You see, he doesn't fancy garrison duty and decided to take French leave, carrying the company funds with him. His superfluity of cash may account for the presence of his pal in ropes—a *peon* who had undertaken to guide him across the desert to our peppery, half-sister republic."

"You mean he's a deserter?"

"Deserter and thief—self-confessed."

The surveyor's accompanying chuckle proved to be for an incident of the capture. This he proceeded to share companionably.

First calling attention to the gray of the truck's paint and the lettering of the United States Army, from which it had been borrowed, he established the further premise that he, himself, when at work on the desert, looked like a war-horse in khaki.

"Thus and so the stage was set, when along come Whiskers and the Mex, making rather hard going of it. At sight of me Whiskers gives a whoop of delight and rushes forward, to extend the gladsome hand of a fellow culprit. You see, he takes it for granted that I've made the *de luxest* getaway he's ever heard of. Right gladly he offers to throw in his lot with mine and share the

stolen company funds with me for an interest in my speed-limit truck. Also, he offers me a job in a scheme of plunder across the border which will bear looking into. I take him at his word and into camp, where I introduce him to Alonzo, who is shocked and chagrined when I bill our guest as a deserter from the cavalry. That night, after Whiskers and his guide have fallen asleep, we tie them up, and here we are, headed for the nearest jail!"

While mounting for departure without availing herself of his gallant hand, Gloriana turned ear to certain pointed comments issuing from the truck.

"From his language," she remarked, "Whiskers does not seem to appreciate his amusing mistake."

"Can we blame him, when the quip of it for him is likely to be twenty years in Fort Leavenworth at hard labor? At that the bucks found a sympathetic listener in your recent escort. He seemed to think that they belonged to him. You saw him resort to gun-play to get them away from me. Fortunately he didn't put that over—quite."

"Mr. Strong wasn't exactly escorting me, but he's a good friend of mine," said the girl with a warning intonation. "I'm much obliged to you for not letting him shoot you."

"Don't mention it; the pleasure is largely mine." Gilson bowed deeply.

She did not seem to notice his facetiousness.

"Now what do you suppose," she pondered aloud, "Phil's interest in that precious pair could have been, if he knew why you arrested them?"

The sign-post shoulders shrugged. "There is no telling about things you don't know. *Must* you be going? Then I'll be giving Hercules some gas and getting my curse-cargo to town. Good evening, Miss Young Lady. We'll meet again—and soon."

Gloriana Frazer was used to surprising people in general, but she did not often surprise herself. Her sensations, therefore, were noteworthy on realizing that, without benefit of the solitary vigil for which she had come, the imminent decision had been reached.

Racing over a short-cut through the mesquite in order that Daddy-Blazes might not consume too many of those hot biscuits for his own good, she accepted it.

That *Romeo* and *Juliet* stuff had been all right in its day, she told herself. But much time had intervened since the most famous of tragedies—time for the growth of common-sense in girls.

Encouraged to desperation by the parental feud of *Montague* and *Capulet*, the fair *Juliet* had loved fondly and all too well. She, Gloriana, although in a like situation and loving fondly, to be sure, did not intend to love too well.

Often, in reading that other girl's story, had she worked out ways in which *Juliet* could have done better for herself. As for her, she was not going to risk any fatal mistakes. Her father had come before Phil; before Phil he must remain until, in natural ways, her "affair" became adjusted to circumstances or circumstances to it.

Very well. She would yield if Blaze still insisted. She would give up the ranch, though it broke her heart and her daddy's heart—which she feared it almost would.

## CHAPTER VIII

BY POWER OF ATTORNEY

THE fast gathering heat of eight o'clock next morning found Blaze Frazer and his daughter riding into the little town of Rabbit Ear, named for a mountain which threatened hourly to tumble down upon it and perhaps induced its cowering attitude.

Gloriana looked about at the familiar scene: houses huddled upon terraced declivities of the deep gulch; cabins creeping, as if in hope of escape, up side ravines; central deeps where crowded the railroad, stock-shipping pens, stores, hotels and livery barns, with their flocking corrals. Aloud she reiterated to her father a plaint which often before she had put to herself:

"Will you tell me why, with all outdoors just beyond, the sponsors for the Ear insisted upon jamming the poor thing into this trench?"

The whimsical demand was typical of such conversation as had marked the ride from home, and the old man's reply observed their unexpressed

pact to avoid further reference to the cause of the trip.

"Can think of only one excuse for such plumb foolishment—they didn't plan it for a couple of deep-breathing wide-fingers like ourselves to smother in!"

"But to name it Rabbit Ear, when the whole range is hopping with Jacks!" she protested.

"'Tain't definite—that's certain sure. Howsomever, I reckon if we don't admire it we'd ought to stay away or lump it."

Not until they were waiting on the depot platform for the tardy local, did Blaze Frazer return to the taboo subject for a final detail. His eyes swerved from the girl to the piñon shade where his white-stockinged sorrel stood brushing tails with Conflagration.

"You promise to take care of Flame as if he was your own top-cutter, don't you?"

"Con will be treated no better and you know what that means," she assured him.

"I ain't asking more." After a thoughtful pause he added: "You'd best take the beasties over the trail to Phoenix. Neither of them's ever been cooped in a slat-car, and I've an idea they wouldn't dote on the experience none."

For just a moment Gloriana hesitated in her



compliance, the hand in the pocket of her corduroy riding skirt clutching a rather remarkable missive which she had placed there with the idea of advancing it as a reminder—a sort of last-moment argument against the temporary fate of parental selection. But she disliked to arouse him anew; so the opportunity, if indeed it was one, passed.

Evidently considering her formal agreement regarding the horses unnecessary, Blaze continued:

“After you’ve waved me off, go right over to the Eureka and corral Tim Rudd for that tally. Don’t leave him run any ranicaboo bluffs on you. Just remind him how that power of attorney makes you every whit as good a man as your daddy, and he won’t dare try to cold-deck you.”

The train jolted in.

Gloriana, after the nature of their long comradeship, held out her hand. But the father’s arms hung limp and a suspicious moisture showed in his eyes as he looked at her.

“You used to give me a flock of candy-stuck, tadpole kisses every time I breezed off on a trip,” he said slowly. “When I come back with Marge, you’ll just naturally have no time for me. Don’t you reckon this once you could—”

The spring of her body and twine of her arms were as feminine as his return was bearlike. The

scant seconds of their unwonted embrace expressed a regardless love. In its fervor neither minded whether the depot loungers stared or looked away.

"All aboard!"

The conductor's warning separated them.

Both stood waving until the local had rattled around the tip of the Ear, he from the rear platform, she from station's end.

With a shudder she recalled her following mind to the there and the then—to the first thing she had to do.

The dutiful-daughter spirit in her tied the lead rope to her father's mount, swung her into her own saddle and set the brisk trot toward the Eureka Stable, which stood, with its attendant corrals, at the upper end of Main Street.

Much as she instinctively disliked the proprietor, disappointing as was her own relegation to the rear, as represented by that "sentence" to Phoenix, distressed as she felt over the leasing of the ranch, she had no intention other than to carry out her father's plans. To have done with the distasteful preliminaries as soon as possible was her imminent desire.

Circumstances beyond her control, however, willed that there should be some delay.

The duty ride brought her first to the corral,

just below the large barn in a partitioned corner of which Timothy Rudd had his office. From a considerable distance down the street she recognized that there was "something doing" within the enclosure. The attendance of Rabbit Ear's best known and laziest "rail-birds," perched like crows on the close-planted fence posts, could have no other meaning.

She drew rein outside the corral just as the horse-trader himself stepped into the "busting" arena. Flinging a leg around her saddle-horn, she decided to watch proceedings in "reserved seat" comfort, since her own business with the man perforce must wait.

The young bronco under treatment evidently had not been saddled without a struggle, from the disheveled appearance of the attendants. His buckskin sides were heaving, his rolling eyes talked war. Withal, she could see that he was by no means an "outlaw," and more terrified than vicious.

Never having heard of Timothy Rudd seeking honors as a "buster," she was somewhat surprised that he should elect a tryout before so critical an audience. The short-gaited stride with which he crossed the corral, however, was suggestive of confidence.

"Pick a soft spot to fall on, Tim!" cawed one of the "crows." "That there ain't no ladies' pal-frey, but a heller of a hoss!"

"'Tain't likely he'll enjoy being forked by a plow-pusher, is it, boys?" cawed another, adding with ironical solicitude: "If yon nag stops your clock, Tim, where to do we telemagraph your folks?"

The compactly-built Missouran turned a smiling face over one shoulder as he waved to his audience. Noticing Gloriana's arrival, he tipped his Stetson in an elaborate greeting. This she acknowledged by a brief nod. With determination accenting his discernible good looks, he laid hold of the short rope which dangled from the horsehair headstall—*jacemo* to the vaquero, "sombre-ro" in puncher vernacular. Pulling upon this to exert its smothering pressure, he slapped the animal across the eyes with his hat a time or two with flagrant bravado.

"*Good night!*" came in chorus from the crows.

Now, hat-fanning was all very well in proper time and place, as the latest bystander knew—say in a bronco-busting contest where the rider is firmly seated and the mount refuses to perform. But to start a breaking bout with such an uncalled-

for insult was not according to the Hoyle of the range.

"I'll give him just three jumps and a twist!" observed a chap-clad critic who straddled the post nearest Gloriana.

"Looks as though he might not need the twist the way he's shuffling that yellow deck for a set-you-down," she agreed.

The puncher's forecast proved exact. Rudd gained the saddle with a swing that showed some skill and found both stirrups. Promptly came the three jumps and the twist. He struck heavily on his shoulder upon a patch of hardpan and furrowed the dust beyond. The buckskin had displayed the leaping muscles of a black-tailed deer, and the twist was peculiar of its kind. The speed of the whole thing all made the fall most ignominious.

The fence-post audience considerably withheld its derision until Rudd demonstrated that he had suffered no serious injury by achieving his feet, which was a good deal for manner's sake. Then their "I-told-you-so's" were strident, their laughter raucous, their gibes pointed and without respect of persons.

"Served him right, didn't it?" observed Gloriana to her chap-clad neighbor.

"It shore did, lady! I'll be—that is to say, I'm dod-burned if it didn't!"

She paid the tribute of a smile for his verbal reserve.

Interest returned to the unhorsed man, who stood rubbing his shoulder in a dazed sort of way. What would he do next? His standing with the onlookers depended upon near-future events.

The fact that he had been thrown was no disgrace, even though the buckskin had broken the local time-record for such bouts. All among those present who had grown to rawhide rank, had bit the dust in "course of sprouts." But always they had come back for a return tussle—more than one, if more were necessary. Rudd was from Missouri; boasted that he had to be shown. Now it was up to him to show them!

"Next" consisted in brushing the dust from his clothes in a manner so painstaking as to be a palpable spar for time. In the respite he seemed to have arrived at decision, spurred, no doubt, by an invitation from the fence to come over and have his joints "'iled."

"Put your rope on that hellion!" he ordered one of his men. "I'll learn the brute!"

While the bronco, which had been engaged in trying to pitch the saddle from his back, was being



lassoed, the trader visited the barn, returning soon with a wicked-looking bull-whip.

At sight of this instrument of torture—frowned upon in a land where an obstreperous horse is respected for his spirit and treated more like a refractory child than a subject for slave punishment—Gloriana moved uneasily in the saddle and urged Con closer to the corral fence. It was no tax upon probabilities to fear that she was about to witness an exhibition of the Tim Rudd cruelty which hitherto she had known only by repute.

Taking the rope from his employee, the trader worked his way toward the plunging horse until again he had partial control through pressure of the headstall. Then out he flung the long-knotted lash from the thick wooden handle of the whip and struck a sharp blow along the buckskin flanks.

At the resultant bellow of rage and pain, Gloriana swung from her saddle to the top rail of the fence.

“You fellows going to stand for that sort of thing?” was the demand she sent down the line.

There was no answer in words. Even the eyes of those nearest her found interest in the mackerel sky overhead or seemed to be studying “sign” in the dust below. None of them approved of the

scourging—that she knew. Still, the horse was Rudd's; also the corral. They hesitated to interfere.

She poised herself on the edge of the rail at the second impact of the lash, followed by the second bellow from the horse which, thanks to the *jacemo*, was held more tightly with every pull.

“Well, I’m not hitched, thank Heaven!”

Springing down from the fence the girl started across the corral. If the buckskin’s eye had “talked war,” the blaze in her own waved the signal for onslaught. She began to run as she saw Rudd draw in the lash and grip the whip-stock for even more vicious punishment.

She did not cry out as he brought down the hardwood upon the velvet muzzle. By now she was near—near enough to know that he would not—*should* not strike again. And the advantage of a surprise-attack was to be hers, for it was evident that no sound of her approach had fallen upon the ears deafened with rage.

The beast staggered from the force of the unbelievable attack. He writhed until the headstall caused his tongue to protrude.

Again the whip-stalk was raised; but not again to descend.

Over Rudd’s shoulder Gloriana’s fingers closed

about the limp end of it in a grip that turned the horseman half around in his tracks.

At sight of the young face flaring at him, Rudd's eyes widened in amaze, his aggressive jaw dropped in a sort of gape. For the moment no word was spoken.

From their top-rail roost the crows waited in pleasurable silence. The "show" promised to be well worth the price of no admission.

The buckskin, sensing opportunity in the interference, gave a frenzied jerk which broke his "buster's" hold upon the headstall rope. This success returned Rudd to action and his original intent. With a curse he strove to wrest away the whip.

"No, you don't!" snapped from Gloriana's set teeth as, with a twisting motion, she drew down his arm and the stalk of contention. The position was one in which her advantage of height counted.

"What you butting in for, child?" he demanded.

"For this whip," she answered. "You had best give it up before the bunch enjoys the treat of seeing a 'child' make you do it!"

Rudd wrenched the stalk again, to find his grip all but broken. His lids narrowed as his

gaze swept the fence where the rail-birds were hunched in evident enjoyment of his discomfiture,—in no doubt, to judge by their grins, of any issue in which old Blaze Frazer's Glory was contestant. Appraising her strength, his mind weighed the possibilities of a struggle.

"I guess you haven't got the idea, Miss Frazer," he stalled. "The horse-brute that downs me ain't foaled yet."

"The man-brute that gets the best of me beating up a colt ain't living—long."

The return was steadily, almost pleasantly put.

Their eyes took up the argument. Although those of the chunky trader were black and bold, they proved no match for the tawny pair of tiger stripes. Under their fierce advices he evidently concluded to forego further contest.

"Anything to please a lady!"

Bowing with what graciousness he could affect, he relinquished the weapon of torture.

Words added *soto voce* reminded Gloriana of the buckskin's future: "I'll bust hell out of him later on."

"Then you'll bust him without beating him, or you'll long for that same place yourself, Mr. Rudd. I'll keep this bull-skinner as a reminder,

and if I hear of that colt showing another welt— Well, I reckon I've got more influence than you in this community."

To her insinuated threat she added a descriptive cut of the whip-lash.

Rudd started involuntarily at the zip of it, then laughed as if he had been trying to affect a fear of her.

"You wouldn't hurt me, now, would you, Miss Frazer? Won't you adjourn to my office, where I can beg for mercy more comfortably?"

"Mercy don't come for begging." Certainly there was no sign of it in her manner.

"But didn't you come to arrange for my count of Blaze stock?"

"It doesn't matter what I came for. The point is that I'm going without making any arrangement."

Her first smile of the mid-corral colloquy appeared. Although he could not know, every pleased curve of it was in salutation of a resolve that had arisen, giant-strong, in her mind.

Concern traced Rudd's face as he gave her a quick, upward glance. "I can't buy your horses until I've tallied them."

"No one is asking you to," beamed Gloriana.

"It won't be necessary to count them. You see, I've decided not to sell—to you."

She started toward the fence and the bays that stood rubbing heads over the top-rail.

For a moment Timothy Rudd looked as stunned as he had on arising after his flight from the neck of the buckskin. This Frazer girl's decision, if persisted in, touched him in the tender spot of his bank-account, deranged his prospects of a clean-up. He sprang after her, laid upon her arm a detaining hand which she threw off with ill-concealed aversion.

"But, Miss Frazer," he protested, "you can't mess up your father's plans, to say nothing of my own, for a mere whim—a sentiment."

"My father would have made new plans if he had seen you this morning. He has a heart for horses bigger than my own." With a sudden flare she added: "Mr. Rudd of Missouri, I wouldn't sell you a mangy coyote, so you might as well tighten the latigo on your tongue."

"By what right—"

"By power of attorney." She answered the unfinished question crisply. From her pocket she drew her document of authority, and held it for a moment so that he might scan it. "If you don't



believe it's as wide as Blaze Ranch, go ask the lawyer who drew it up."

She started on.

"You'll repent this silly stand, young woman!"

Gloriana answered his exasperated cry with an oversoulder laugh. "Don't forget. That buckskin's not to show another welt, or— Well, as my dad has missed this performance and is too far away to change his own mind, I consider myself publicly justified in changing it for him."

"I'll have the law on you! I'll show you where you get off, Miss High-and-Mighty! I'll—I'll—"

Showing no further interest in the threats of the horse-trader, she climbed the fence. Timothy Rudd, grinding the corral floor beneath the high heel of his "fancy" boot, was not included in the gauntleted wave with which, after mounting Con, she saluted the grinning rail-birds.

## CHAPTER IX

### A SILENT CONFIDANT

HER spirits light under the problem self-loaded upon her shoulders by the impulsive decision that no equine wearing the Blaze brand should fall, even for a time, into the power of such as Missouri Rudd, Gloriana turned out of Main Street at the first corner. At slackened pace, with the led horse close behind, she rode through the twisted gulch, whose sides were decorated by cabins perched on terraces overlooking the roofs of other cabins below. The road grew steeper, but she pushed hard, the weighty consideration before her seeming to demand the higher air.

"Hope you approve, Connie!" she leaned forward to insinuate into the ear eagerly set back for the confidence. "That poor, scared buckskin was too nice a bronco for abuse, wasn't he? Oh, I know he was a skate for looks, compared to you; but of course he didn't have your start or bringing up."

Conflagration agreed with repeated nods; then, as if to make certain that she understood, halted his climb to twist his neck and nibble her glove.

"Some contract I've undertaken," the girl continued, "running a ranch in a land that's drained of men! Reckon I can count on you?"

A rub against one elbow distracted her attention from the adoring eyes of her own mount. She turned to find her father's favorite trying to nose in from behind.

"What's the objection, Flame? Don't you realize that I'm an active pardner in this hoss farm and that Daddy Blazes would do the same in my place? Or is it that you want to volunteer your four-ironed aid?"

The led horse showed his appreciation of being taken into the conference.

"Guess the last is the best bet, eh?" Gloriana exulted. "Well, consider yourself recruited in my company. We can't waste time with red tape, for our days are going to be crowded as a bee-tepee."

Across the summit of the knob curved a wide wooden arch, upon the white paint of which were recorded the solemn words: "Last Rest." The girl dismounted, threw the bridles over the horses' heads and passed beneath the arch.

Her sombrero under her arm for coolness, she soon gained her objective. There she squatted before a shrine where, in all vicissitudes since her lonely little-girlhood, she had come for meditation.

"I'm back again, Dan Dunn!" With pagan abandon, the beautiful Christian lifted speech, hands, eyes. "Here's a s'laam for your very good health and here's another for my hope of some sane advice."

He so familiarly addressed stared straight ahead. Only a cenotaph statue was Dan Dunn, carved from the drab sandstone within the financial limitations of a long-ago memorial fund as a reception committee of one to welcome any and all newcomers into the cemetery beyond. Yet a celebrity in the neighborhood he was, a person of power. Bare-headed, long-haired, man-sized, grim, he conformed as closely as crude tools and materials would permit to the outer presentment of the region's most noted fighting pioneer. The real "old-timer" of a gun clutched against his imitation side was a reminder of past dangers conquered in combat for benefit of a new generation. Through the sky-blue paint with which, by way of verisimilitude, his eyeballs had been colored, seemed to look the indomitable cour-

age that, in olden times, had helped the dead to die gallantly—that should, in these still stressful present-days, help the quick to live aright.

An inspiration to many was this upstanding monument to valor, as represented in the quondam Daniel Dunn; to Gloriana Frazer—child, girl and woman—a source of cheer and sympathy.

Not at all discouraged by the non-committal return of her salutation and worshipful regard, she continued to address her case-hardened mentor in the easy style which only their long and close relationship condoned.

“I do find myself in need of a hint or two or three, old scout!” she remarked with an upflung smile which even a sand-stone hero could not reasonably have been expected to resist. “You’ve never failed me before—that’s why I sit and s’laam.

“*You* know, Daniel! I’ve got a sort of pull-trigger way of deciding things, and it helps to hear someone I believe shout back that I’ve hit the bull’s-eye. You understand the feeling, I’m sure, as you used to do some decisive shooting with that blunderbuss of yours yourself. Yes, you old tomahawk, you haven’t fooled me a minute by posing here as a saint all these years and years! Well, Danny dear, it’s this way!”

Characteristically she detailed the "call" to Mexico which her father had answered so promptly, the plan he had made for her relegation to the rear, the joker he had left in that legal last thought, her well-intentioned start to carry out instructions and the reversal in favor of her own way at the corral. Her heart-deep determination to put through the impossible strengthened with the recital.

There could be no doubting Dan Dunn's appreciation, she soon declared. She, for one, felt certain that, had he been on the Eureka corral fence that morning, he would simply have shot Judson's whip-hand off at the wrist in order to make sure he would beat up no more cayuses. There was quite no use for Danny to look so blue-eyed and harmless. She knew what she knew about him!

"And brave, bold Timothy is going to have the law on me—the law and a lot of other things I didn't stop to memorize," she continued. "What should you say I'd best do about it?"

Was her imagination playing her tricks or had the blue-painted gaze slanted downward suggestively toward the rusty old revolver which, it was said, had settled so many contested points of Dan's day? She chose to give him benefit of the doubt.

"I *have* the law of the range, that's so! And



it's plenty dependable if one has the grit to enforce it. That is just about what I thought Danny Dunn would say!"

For the edification of the nearby tombstones she interpreted aloud her sandstone mentor's look. Her hand sought the square hilt of the new-fangled flat weapon that rested within its especial pocket in her skirt. She assured both him and herself that she had been well reminded, and rejoiced that his counsel was of the sort she was most likely to follow.

Of that "law" about which Rudd had been sputtering when she strode beyond ear-shot, Gloriana was frank to admit she knew little. From what her father had told her of his negotiations with the trader, she knew that nothing had been set down in writing. Verbal agreement there probably had been, but she considered that nullified by the cruel exhibition of the party of the second part.

Yet, written or verbal, contracts were nothing in her life when weighed against cruelty to animals. If Timothy Rudd came insisting around Blaze Ranch— Her fingers caressed the black rubber hand-grips of the automatic.

"Now that we are thoroughly agreed in our

approval of myself, Danny," she said, "we come to the especial advice I want. Since I am to carry on the work of the ranch to a triumphant finish, and give dad the next happiest moment of his career—the first happiest will be when he claps his eyes on Mother Marge—where am I to commandeer helping hands?"

She perked her head to one side like some gay red grosbeak and watched the sphinx-like face. For perhaps a full minute she actually gave her monumental friend a chance to speak.

"Since real men are so scarce, do you advise me to descend to the employment of greasers?" she urged. "Now, listen, Daniel; even if I did yank up the deep-rooted prejudice of all Frazers, the prospect isn't s'lubrious. Blaze Ranch is so widely known as a barred zone to *cholos*, that I doubt if I'd find one this side of the border who would ride for me. Since white men are not and brown men *will* not—"

In a wordless finish of appeal, she lifted her hands from the ground where they had been resting, palms down, since her last salaam, and flung them upward. In the act, the fingers of her right bore aloft a flimsy white something, inadvertently touched, which she had noticed earlier as a crum-

pled piece of paper. In truth, it proved to be one of the squares of cambric sold by Rabbit Ear outfitters as "ladies' linen 'kerchiefs."

And to no ordinary lady had it belonged, as attested by two strong signs—one the reek of cologne which lifted with it, the other a frill of "footing" sewed as painstakingly about its goodly borders as though it were of daintier size and material.

Not a lady in the Ear would have troubled to shirr on that frill—none possibly could sew so badly—save one. Coquetry fluttered in its every inch; romance—or the determination to awake romance—emanated from the too-sweet breath of the extract.

"Miss Miracle!" Gloriana exclaimed aloud, in an even more convincing tone than had been used with the words as addressed to herself some days before. She waved the white square triumphantly at her sandstone counselor.

"I *sabe*, old wisacre! I'm bright, you know, and all I need is a sign. Why didn't you remind me of Mena Miracle before? If you'd just mentioned this handkerchief, probably dropped when she strolled this way with Ed Bristo, trying to make him notice the serious end of life, I'd have caught the general idea. It's a shame, at that,

she should be wasting her ripe twenty-fifth year, with him determined to remain a bachelor.

"The range minus men equals—*women*. There! It's a wise pupil that knows her answer is right, so she can go on to the next problem.

"I'll be sloping along now, Danny, but with my heart plumb full of thanks to you." She got to her feet and bowed. "I always get the goingest thoughts when I come up here."

After backing a respectful distance from her oddly-chosen shrine, she dashed off under the spur of what seemed inspiration.

## CHAPTER X

### THE MIRACLE MAID

AGAIN on Main Street, the enlightened look was still upon Gloriana's face. Sight of the very person she sought, Miss Philomena Miracle, returning from dinner to her "job" at the Oasis, dispersed any fear of a hunt. Postponing attention to her own appetite, she followed at once toward the one-time saloon, now converted into a soft-drink emporium by both State and Nation-wide edict.

For once Gloriana was glad to be the only girl of the region loved by the acknowledged belle of Rabbit Ear. Before the Oasis she dismounted and entered through the screen door which had replaced the swinging ones of the shack's strong-cheer era.

"Hello, deary! What'll you have?"

Philomena's greeting may have been suggested by her surroundings, which had undergone small change since more festive times. From behind

the original polished bar of near-mahogany she beamed. The mirror at the back was still frosted with its "Drink and Be Merry" admonition. The tables at which the élite of the Ear to-day sipped their ice-cream sodas and spooned their sundaes wore the green-felt coverings of yesterday, their central kitty-slots not yet plugged up.

Lithographed portraits of brewery ladies, the like of whom was never seen in the flesh, continued to decorate the walls, although the only beer sold in the Oasis now was of the near-but-yet-so-far persuasion.

"Not a thing to drink," said Gloriana.

"You don't say? Off the stuff?" The dry-bar-maid's long black lashes only half-veiled the mirth of her snapping eyes.

"I've forsworn sweets for a while."

"Lemonade, then?"

Gloriana shook her head.

"I dropped in just to see with my own eyes that the report was true. Could hardly believe it."

"What report? What has strained your believer?"

"That you, Mena, were where you are, doing what you are doing."

Philomena's lids lifted, that none of the amaze



in her eyes might be unseen. She leaned aggressively over the bar.

"Say, you red jasper, you trying to rile me, after such friends as we've been to each other?"

"And I always thought you had spunk," Gloriana continued in a grieved tone. "It hurts me—it really does—to see a man-strong, ranch-bred girl like you—and the best-looker in Rabbit Ear—prying the tin tops off soda bottles. What's the idea, Mena? Do you think you're having a career?"

"The idea is that Ed Bristo thinks I'm necessary to his business and comfort," countered Philomena, with a breezy sniff. "Does it happen that you've been slanting your yellow orbs his way? Glory Frazer, you ain't got interested in Edward?"

It was easy for Gloriana to freight her laugh with reassurance as she pictured the gallant in question—a saloon-keeper perforce reformed, thin, with a black mustache, slightly stooped shoulders and the nerves of a pilgrim handling his first gun.

"No, no, Mena, I haven't a wisp of interest in your Eddie, except as concerns you. What I really came for is to tell you the pinch I'm in and ask you to help me out. Can't you—won't

you—" She paused to gather courage, then took the plunge: "Come on back to the range you never should have left, Mena—get to doing something worth while! My dad's had to make an unexpected trip down into Mexico, and it's up to me to run the ranch. Come along back to the saddle."

That the proposition attracted her friend was never in doubt, but equally in evidence was her reluctance to consider it.

"Not me, Glory! I've sworn to myself that I've quit punching and pants for good. There ain't a devil of reward in it for a girl born to the grace of skirts—not even a refined husband."

"Oh, I see!" Gloriana affected pleased enlightenment. "When are you and Eddie going to be married?"

· "Well, the date ain't exactly set yet."

"Nor the question exactly popped?"

At this suggestion Philomena coughed uneasily.

"What do you mean, cross-questioning me into my most sacred feelings?" she complained. "It's all right being friends, but—"

"It sure is," Gloriana interrupted. "And it's just because I am your friend—your best friend—that I'm asking you. Do you think the way to

win a man is by slaving for him before you're legally obliged to? Where's the spirit you used to have? Gone with the first half of your twenties? Come, you don't mind telling me: has Eddie out-and-out asked you yet?"

"You see"—the head of the one-time belle who was "getting on" and knew it sagged miserably—"he's been a bach so long and become so used to not proposing, that it's likely kind of hard for him to break the habit."

"And kind of easy for him, Mena, to have you running his place without exalting you to the high position that is your right and due—and you already inclined to flesh! Come, take my advice; let him mix his own drinks for a while. It's the only way to bring him around."

"But he ain't experienced mixing soft stuff, not Ed!" objected Philomena, yet with a flicker of consideration in her glance.

Gloriana pursued the advantage.

"If his intentions are honorable, or ever are going to be, he'll follow you and ask you all the quicker for missing you. You always hankered to run an outfit before you quit the range. Now here's your chance to help yourself by helping me. I'll make you foreman of Blaze Ranch."

"But who is there to fore?" the dark girl de-

manded, cautious from past acquaintance with the Frazer labor troubles, although obviously allured by the prospect of rank.

"There is Mary Ellen O'Grady to start with; and there will be T. Weed Gay, when he shakes off certain ties that bind him—namely, wrist and ankle cuffs."

"You mean, Glory, old Tumble Weed Gay? Don't tell me that he's in bad again!"

Gloriana laughed in defiance of the dire truth, as she withdrew from her pocket that letter which she had not pressed upon her father by way of reopening their argument at the last.

"Dad got this billy-doo from him a couple of weeks ago. Read it for yourself."

With reminiscent interest, the dry-bar-maid began to spell out the following effusion, pencil-scribbled upon the back of a tomato-can label:

DEAR OLD MAN:

Yours recd. I'll blow in soon as I can blow out of this here jail, which said is hotter'n the back-log of hell. In case you want me sooner, slip a couple of sticks of dynamite to your old side-kick.

T. WEED GAY.

P. S.—The coyote what I shot was only a thieving greaser. He's so long about dying, I'm afeared he'll get well. Address that dyn'mite: Care Calaboose, Cactus City, Arizona, U. S. A.

Of course, "Old Man" Frazer had not sent the "kingdom-come stuff," he being a law-abiding citizen and a one-time, although unsuccessful, candidate for the high office of county sheriff. Tumble Weed Gay had been left to free himself of the fetters of the law, by the crook of escape or the hook of his Mexican victim's recovery. And his freedom, if gained, would be no assurance of his appearance at the ranch where he was so sorely needed. The dour old-timer's sobriquet was as well taken as his surname was misfit. Should the ranch see him that season, it would be because some fair wind had "tumbled" him that way.

But any or all of these adverse chances would not help to encourage Philomena. In the fluctuating state of that maiden's mind she needed assurance.

Gloriana continued her list of inducements.

"I'll round up others by the time we've got to have them. You can claim Flame for the top horse of your string. I'm leading him out to-day, and you can ride him home."

"Flame's the last ding-busted word in the hoss dictionary!" At the admission a spark of eagerness lit the eyes of the mis-cast soda clerk.

"Meanwhile," Gloriana boosted the pot, "you'll have the title!"

"It sounds kind of empty compared with—"

Philomena's glance around her present kingdom completed the inference.

Gloriana, forced to bluff, got to her feet and started for the door.

"Let's see—just what is your title here now? Well, since you won't let me help you, good-by, *Miss Miracle!*" she called back.

Upon the girl behind the bar her taunt had instant effect. With much emergency-made profanity Philomena declared that Mr. Eddie Holdback Bristo would have to acquire a new dupe to plan and run his home on the hope of his breaking that long-standing habit of bachelorhood. A direct call, punctuated by even more pointed invective, stopped her volunteer aide at the screen door.

Gloriana turned just in time to see the forlorn damsel's none too fragile body clearing the mahogany in one spring. The finish of the athletic rush was essentially feminine. Into a pulsating embrace she found herself gathered; a voice, oozy with emotion, poured into her ear.

"A kerosene greasewood fire for Ed and his



hints! I know you're dum-blasted right; have knowed it down in my boots for a long time. But I'm so soft when it comes to—to—well, the men critters I have loved, you know—that I need somebody hard on the sect like you to ginger me up. I'll foreman Blaze Ranch for you—may I never get proposed to if I don't!"

Before Gloriana left the Oasis, the seasoned brunette belle was already giving the dry bar a farewell polish, presumedly that Eddie Bristo might be reminded of her house-wifeliness after she was gone.

"And say, Mena," the new employer cautioned her from the door, "we won't be giving any tea-parties out at Blaze this season, so leave your organdie and chiffon in the going-away chest—and don't forget the moth-balls!"

"Don't you ever worry, deary!" was the assured return. "Six months in town ain't made no gilly out of me. Soon as I'm red up here and have wisened Eddie to the separation that's going to yawn betwixt us, I'll be ready, boots and spurs, for action."

An hour later, after dinner at the American Eagle House, Gloriana returned to the ex-café with her horses, her mind none too confident as to

the endurance of her advice when put to the test of "wisening up" Eddie.

Her spirits soared, however, when at once, as if at a cue, her lately engaged forewoman appeared, looking anything but a "gilly" of the metropolis of Rabbit Ear. The erstwhile fluffed black hair was tightly coiled beneath a drooping Stetson; a silk neckchief was draped into a bib over a businesslike checker-board shirt; both corduroy trousers and top-boots showed the wear of past rangeworthy days.

In Philomena's wake, poke-toting, came a tall male, whose drooping mustache and lank black attire might almost have been temperamental tributes to the parting about-to-be.

"I told you it wouldn't take long, deary," Philomena called, evidently having risen to enjoyment of the elaborate ruse in her game of love. "Ed is too dinged stunned to make a kick about the short notice. He's bore up so wonderful that I doubt if he minds the new arrangement at all."

"Sure I mind. Don't know how I'll do without you around the store."

So morose was the tone of the cadaverous and all too restrained suitor that Gloriana felt assured she was serving more than her own interest in

transferring the activities of the lady in the case from soda-pop bottles to more alive cavalry remounts.

Barricaded from his hearing by the sound-proof body of Flame, she whispered into the ear of her who would change her name—when she could:

“A draught of brief absence for Eddie, with a dash of elsewhere essential bitters, ought to make him parched for the marry-me gulp.”

Philomena winked—a sign of shrewdness in her love which pointed toward success. It was well that Gloriana had been looking closely at her, for in a fraction of the same second the frivolous eyelid raised, then lowered again, this time in a droop of longing.

Over to her “last hope” she sidled, with soft-cooed adjurations about how he was to care for this and that, fingering meanwhile the diamond which studded his boiled shirt front—a reward to which many had aspired, but which Mena was at last in a fair way to obtain.

## CHAPTER XI

### UNDER LOWERING CLOUDS

"THERE'S the band that means money in the bank." With a full-arm sweep Gloriana Frazer indicated to her forewoman the two hundred or more four-year-olds peacefully cropping the wild red-top which grew luxuriantly upon the bottom known as the "middle" ranch. From the distance of their knoll of vantage the tones of bay and sorrel coats blended gratefully with the tinge upon the waving grass. The offspring of thoroughbred sires and half-blood mothers, they were a calculated breed, concealing beneath fine outlines and handsome covering the stamina and endurance of their plain-wise dams.

"The ring-tailest bunch I ever lamped!" approved Philomena, adding after a second look: "Some nags and not a skate in the lot! Are they hard to bust?"

The young by-power-of-attorney boss explained that practically all of the band had felt the saddle the year before as part of her father's course for

"threes." She believed that, unless the before-sale inspection proved unusually severe, they could close after riding one out of every ten.

"Which'll be easier on our innards," commented Philomena, with characteristic practicality. "Not that I'm thinking of dodging the gaff, deary, but I *would* like to keep my legs from getting bowed at this late date!"

That time might be saved when there was so much to be done, the young women had led their mounts over the cut-off trail which Gloriana had followed the week before with old Always Busy. They had looked over the mules pastured on the upper ranch, then ridden toward home across the rolling acres.

Night was falling as they reached the lower ranch, stabled the tired horses, and strode off together toward the squat cabin. Somewhat to Gloriana's surprise, lights showed through the living-room windows as well as in those of the cook-shack to the rear.

Her wonder grew, since Mary Ellen as a rule kept zealously close to her own domain. As the throaty tones of a masculine voice came to their ears across the velvet yard, she could not repress her amazement. She checked her companion just outside the door, that they might get perspective

on the identity of the male whom Miss O'Grady was entertaining.

"Ain't you never going to get supper?" Plainly they heard the querulous demand.

"Saint's name, how can I with you sprawling your plumb worthless carcass in the best room?"

"Until you shout grub-pile it's a fitten roost for the only he-man on the place."

"Is it fitten for a *jailbird*?" shrilled the cook. "Would I be trusting the murdering likes of you out of my sight? I would not. I'll feed you, fresh from the penitentiary though you be—I'd feed a buzzard onct—but 'twill be one eye for the stove and t'other on you, me hearty."

Gloriana had heard enough. She clapped a hand between her friend's competent shoulders.

"Tumble Weed Gay has rolled in, Mena—wafted hither by some kind breeze in the nick o' time!" she cried. "At last there is some one for you to *fore-man*!"

When they entered the living-room unannounced, they found the desert derelict leaning forward in the softest chair, his fierce glare boring Mary Ellen, who stood with her plump arms akimbo upon the support of her plumper hips.

"Me prayer is answered!" exclaimed that lady fervently.



The old ranger snorted.

*"Your prayer? Hell!"*

The laughter of the newcomers would not longer be restrained, so deadly earnest was the show of animosity between the two.

"What in the world has transformed you one-time turtle-doves into a pair of battling-beetles?"

Gloriana finally managed to voice the question.

"This she-woman has aspersed my fair name as a cit of Arizona, consarn her freckled hide!" offered Tumble Weed.

"A jailbird I'm after calling him, and just that carrion he is," expanded Mary Ellen. "Can't you smell the must of dungeon deep?"

Citizen Gay sniffed the air in his immediate vicinity, as though momentarily afraid that the charge had foundation.

"No use his denying it!" pressed the weighty lady. "Didn't I hear Blaze Frazer read out of a letter how the creature was shut up in the Cactus City prison? And now he comes back to me after months of separation, with thoughts only of that there maw he calls his stomach and with never a notice of how my new stays become me! Who knows what murthers he's done to escape?"

The secret of the good lady's animosity was disclosed. At least in her own mind, the ranger

had ranked as a suitor in that more or less dreamy period of his last sojourn at the ranch.

Evidently absence had not had the proverbial effect upon his heart, and she, fair-fat-and-all-of-forty, had been moved thereby to recrimination.

"Whatever he does when away from your good influence, Mary Ellen, we must not forget that T. Weed Gay, Esquire, is always welcome at Blaze Ranch."

Gloriana's words oiled the troubled waters.

"Spoken like the quality you was born, Miss Glory!" cried the ranger, arising and saluting her with a profound obeisance. "If all females were like onto you, what a glorious Eden this here desert world would flower into!"

Hereabout it should be stated that in his youth Tumble Weed Gay had been scalped in an Indian engagement and wore a wig which had a way of choosing the most unsuitable moments to slip its moorings and fall over one or the other of his ears. This occasion of active courtesy proved to be one of the moments.

Mary Ellen openly snickered.

"Will you be helping the convict to settle his head mattress, whilst I jiffy up the supper?"

After this shot via her mistress, she pounded out of the room with her most imposing waddle.

"You've turned up just in time, old friend, to save Blaze from degenerating into a feminist ranch." The young boss continued her welcome to the prodigal. "Dad's had a hurry call to Mexico on—on some most important family business, and lately we haven't had any luck hiring punchers who would stick. I'm owner *pro tem* and Mena here is our new foreman. You complete the cast."

His wig firmly readjusted, T.W.G. bowed again.

"My happiness at being of service to a Frazer is always great and deep. Except for its cook-woman, Blaze Ranch is more like home to me than any other hang-out in the world. At last I am content that that pesky greaser healed up."

"You been making targets out of Mexicans again, T. Weed?" Philomena frowned in her darkest manner, obviously trying out her new authority.

For just a moment Mr. Gay lived up to his family name to the extent of uproarious laughter.

"When I recollect, Mena, how you appropriated my shin for your first hobby-horse and rode it regardless, your stern way of talking to me sounds downright amusing."

"Well, just leave me remark that I'm riding

Flame these days," she asserted. "I'm soured on all men, so better keep your gun holstered while I'm forewomanning this ranch, or I'll have to snatch it offen you."

The prodigal grinned amiably.

"I promised them I'd be all for peace when they let me out of that there Cactus bake-oven. Reckon I'll have to keep my word, since you say so, though I got to admit I wa'n't particularly meaning to."

He paused, scratched his false thatch as meditatively as though the hair grew from his scalp, then turned to Gloriana.

"If you're the old man and Mena's the forewoman and Ellen's the cook, what— Little fishes, *what* am I?"

"You, Tumble Weed? Why, you're the outfit!"

"Might as well be married—and a community husband, at that!" A chuckle belied the supreme male's scowl.

After supper, Gloriana settled before the desk to attend the confusion left by her father's hurried departure. Some time was consumed restoring the ranch "office" to its wonted neatness, but at last all their business papers were assorted to her

satisfaction. She turned to reëxamine at leisure the parcel from the South which had brought such lightning change into their lives.

As she began to undo the wrappings, she noticed that the postage had been paid in United States stamps. The fact surprised her until she remembered that Nogales was actually on the boundary; that to drop mail within the States required but the crossing of a street.

The next second, however, her expression of reassurance changed to intense scrutiny. And as she stared a doubt so cruel as to be well-nigh incredible hurt her mind.

The only post-mark stamped upon the wrapping paper was that of Rabbit Ear, Arizona. The packet had not traveled by mail from Nogales or any other border office. It had been posted in their own railroad town.

A deliberate effort was necessary to withdraw her eyes from the stamped circle. The local mark had the fascination of a serpent's eye for her, the simile in keeping with the venomous possibilities of what it might connote.

Natural enough it was that her father should have overlooked the telltale surcharge before tearing open the paper covering; that his excitement on discovery of its contents should preclude any

later examination of such an outside detail. Until now Gloriana had not seen the wrapper except in his hands, and her notice of the post-mark had been through chance rather than search.

Except for the tokens enclosed, she must have pronounced the summons a fraud upon its face—a trick to get Blaze and the five thousand dollars demanded into a region where robbery would be reasonably safe. But the veil and the bracelet were genuine; had belonged indubitably to her mother. Some one had penetrated at least further than had they, with all their months of effort, toward the mystery concealed by the shifting desert sands.

For the moment she forced her attention away from that imminent, heart-burning query of whether or not her mother was alive. At least she would continue to hope until all hope was gainsaid.

The letter had mentioned "inquirings" about her father. Was it possible that the writer or writers—the grasping "Samaritans"—had scouted into their home neighborhood, not only to locate the dupe, but to learn to what limit they might go with their extortion? Had they found the Frazers none too well supplied with ready cash and hit upon the five thousand as a demand pos-



sible of redemption? To hurry matters along, had they disregarded locale and posted the packet in Rabbit Ear?

Possibilities, all of these, Gloriana admitted on consideration. Naturally such schemers as the conditions of the letter proved would not care to risk a personal conference. To meet Blaze on his own ground would have been hazardous. Down there on that unlocated Mexican rancharia they would have the game in their own hands, except for the personal resource of their victim, and this they evidently were willing to flout.

There were other possibilities of her discovery. The neighborhood post-mark suggested the equally plausible surmise that some one nearer home had later knowledge of her mother than they, and had come into possession of the tokens enclosed. In that case why the letter from Mexico—for what purpose had it and the packet been sent? Who might expect to profit by her father's hurried departure?

To this came emphatic reply in the form of another question: Who had been at hand, not a half-hour after receipt of the letter, according to Blaze's report, with a pat offer to buy their stock and take over the ranch?

The finger of suspicion straightened, pointed.

Timothy Rudd, late of Missouri, had been trading recently in Mexican horses; she knew that. With every one else in their little world, he must have heard the details of their loss. Had he chanced upon proofs of the tragic end which had been perforce assumed—proof hitherto hidden in the Solemncholy's cruel heart—and used them thus to his advantage?

The girl contemplated each incident of that recent encounter in the corral. His rage when she had refused to deal with him after his manhandling of the buckskin seemed, in retrospect, even more significant than at the time. She remembered, too, that it was not her seizure of the whip which had angered him most, but her consequent refusal to talk business.

Since plot there was, had she hit upon the motive? At any rate, she could not risk disregarding it.

It summed up rather convincingly. Advantage had been taken of old Blaze Frazer's undying grief for his lost mate to get him out of the way in a hurry and in need of ready cash. Rudd had been at hand to drive a sharp bargain which would give him the market band, the younger horses, and a long-term lease on their ranch. Had she not chanced to witness the maltreatment of that

frightened cayuse, the deal already would have been closed beyond recall.

Doubly justifiable now seemed her disregard of the paternal fears on her behalf, since by remaining she might save not only the ranch, the stock, and the "fighting" Frazer name, but the truth about her mother as well.

After having gone to such pains in the preliminaries of his machinations, if such they were, one of Timothy Rudd's unenviable reputation would not be likely to give up without a struggle. The circumstance of her public rebuke of his methods would only make him the more eager to accomplish his purpose—to show her and his world that she, even with her power of attorney, was no match for him. From that moment she must be on her guard; without delay must throw out such lines of defense as best she could with her skeleton outfit. Whether right or wrong, no harm would be done. And by keeping both mind and body active, perhaps she could live through the days of waiting until she might hope to hear the result of her father's journey.

Her decision as to the first advisable move was quickly made and involved the participation of the only man on the ranch. Arising, she started toward the passage that gave directly upon the

“caboose” where T. Weed Gay had tumbled into early slumber. She was about to pass out when a rap upon the front door commanded her return.

Who could have come out here where callers were so rare—and at such an hour? The soft purring which assailed her ears from outside brought amazement, even before she opened the door upon Philip Strong, Jr.

## CHAPTER XII

### A DEFINITE MENACE

WITH goggle-eyed cap in hand and motor coat flapping in the night wind, the young man stood on the top step, looking as much at ease as though his call had precedent.

"Phil!" Gloriana scarcely knew whether to conceal or express her surprise.

"May I come in for a moment before the breeze blows out your lamp?"

Although further urged by the hospitality of Western tradition, she gazed questioningly at him, not able to realize whether she was glad or sorry that he had come.

"I fully appreciate that I've never been invited over here," he continued, after stepping inside and closing the door. "But I have ample excuse to-night."

"An excuse, Phil, that nullifies your promise to me to keep away?"

"You'd give me back that promise if you knew

how worried I am about you—have been ever since hearing this afternoon that your father had left you alone.”

“Then you know he has gone?”

At the click in her tone he stooped to look into her eyes. “Of course I know—everybody does. I wouldn’t have come here except for that. Of course, if you tell me to go—”

He shrugged his shoulders to indicate subjection to her will; yet even while doing so his eyes remained fixed on hers in hope—those brilliant, night-black eyes which were more wont to demand than ask.

The heart of the girl born to a predisposition toward fine stock warmed as she studied him. Certainly Philip was a splendid specimen—tall, heavy as perfect fitness would allow, his head, in relief against the whitewashed door, well shaped and set. His face, as irradiated by the lamp-light, had more appeal for her than usual—the intolerance which she often deplored softened by concern for her welfare.

And it was generous of him to forget what he must have felt to be a lack of consideration on her part at yesterday’s farewell. Several times since she had wondered how she might make that up to him. Here was her chance.



"You shouldn't have come, Phil, but since you have— The promise was made to me, not to dad. As I am boss here now I must rely on my own judgment, even about you. For just that moment, draw up a chair."

When they were seated opposite each other she took the chance.

"I didn't mean to offend you last evening," she said. "It was only that I won't have folks think I meet you purposely."

*"Folks?"*

His inflection was not at all complimentary to the man who had come from out the desert with the noisy cargo.

"But never mind that, dear girl," he continued as though it didn't matter at all. "My feelings are case-hardened where you are concerned. And I suppose I didn't show up very well, letting that greener juggle my gun away. The force I spent trying to control my temper would have finished him a dozen times over."

"It seems that he was only doing his duty as a government agent and citizen in regard to his prisoners."

Gloriana watched the handsome face as she spoke. She noticed that two spots of dull red showed through the tan at her reminder.

Like a boy in eagerness he explained, and in explaining continued to reproach:

"Oh, of course I had to make a boneheaded play about the prisoners—and before you! Got started on a wrong lead which the surveyor could have straightened with a word, but wouldn't."

"Then you didn't know that the man Mr. Gilson calls Whiskers is a deserter from the regular army and a thief—that the *cholo* was trying to help him escape with pilfered funds?"

"How could I know when the *cholo*, as you call old José, has worked for us as a vaquero for years? Rusty Wagner, *alias* 'Whiskers,' has also given us a hand for the past month or so. I knew the governor wouldn't want to lose them at this crowded season on a cow ranch, so offered to be responsible for any devilment they might have been up to that had riled the fellow who calls himself a government agent. He might have stated the facts in the first place instead of being the most irritating man I ever—"

"Yes, he is irritating," she acceded gravely. "I hated to believe that you'd help a thief to escape."

"Well, not if I knew it!"

The conviction of his voice pleased the girl. This was the Phil she liked best—straightforward,

honest, the man she always had hoped would prove himself against even her father's prejudice.

"But enough of my troubles—they are not what I broke all the rules and regulations of my Glory-made catechism to talk about," he continued and plunged into his subject with characteristic heat. "I'm just back from the Ear, where I heard that Rudd is making all kinds of threats to get even with you for refusing to go on with that deal. It's a mad thing for you to try to run this horse ranch yourself."

"Mad? And how do you know what I intend to try?"

"From what I heard of your mix-up with the trader and from poor Eddie Bristo. Ed's all cut up over Mena's getting into the broil—as well he ought to be. The governor is worried, too."

Gloriana looked her incredulity.

"Now, now!" the son reproved her. "P. H., Sr., has his good points. He couldn't have been more concerned for a daughter of his own and a sister of mine than for you when I told him the position in which you'd been left. Bossing a ranch like this is too heavy a task for you under ordinary circumstances. Your father realized that or he never would have dickered with a man of Rudd's ilk. Fighting defenseless women is the

very thing Rudd would have chosen for himself—so you're playing into his hand."

"But we're not defenseless. Forewarned is forearmed, you know."

"Forewarned?" He gave her a startled glance.

"Through an odd circumstance, Phil, I had come to the same conclusion as you regarding Rudd just before you knocked."

"You have heard, then, of the ugly threats he's been making about what he'll do to the Frazers? As there's only one Frazer left in this vicinity, Glory, that means *you!*"

The girl laughed into his anxiety. "Fortunately I've had a tip as to the sort of thing that may be expected from him."

"A tip? Nobody could have a sure tip as to what a short-card trickster of his sort might do," asserted Strong. "I couldn't wait until tomorrow to talk to you—I just forgave your recent disregard of my feelings in one gulp and broke all rules. Glory"—his voice deepened as he lifted to hers in the lamp-glow a face intense from unashamed craving for her—"I risked your displeasure to-night to offer you two things. One is every resource of Emerald Ranch in case of trouble, with the first-aid of my father and myself.

At the slightest sign of overt act you are to call on us."

"You must thank your father for me."

Gloriana's appreciation lacked her usual sincerity, for a thought had intruded that Phil was including the family enemy in his own anxiety for an all too manifest reason.

"And the other thing I came to offer—" He paused, then added quietly: "It is myself. Will you take me, Glory? I called you mad a moment since. But it is I who am mad—for you. Won't you marry me at once—give me the right to love you and look after you?"

Long as she had expected one day to hear this formal offer from the man whom she had considered her "fate" since earliest girlhood. Gloriana Frazer was unprepared. She sat straight in her chair, drew a quick breath, gazed into the empty fireplace.

And as she gazed she realized a smothering sensation around her heart. It was as if some long-weathered fuel had been set afire by his words, as if the smoke were rising to confuse and blind her. Through the smother all she realized was one poignant thought—a memory that was an accusation. Her father had said that Phil would do just what he had done to-night. That was

why she had not known what to say on discovering who had knocked. Now she knew that she had been more disappointed to see him than glad. The very first night on which she was known to be alone he had leaped all barriers and come "pestering" her.

The red flame that had risen from her heart, that now illumined the only answer she could make, was her sense of honor. And Phil seemed to lack that sense! No matter why he had come, what his anxiety, or how urgent the claim of his love, he should have found another way, should not have forced himself across the forbidden threshold to-night.

Anger against herself for admitting him, as well as against him for demanding admittance, brought her to her feet.

"You have chosen the wrong place and the wrong time to put that question," she said, her voice sounding doubly cold as compared with the fervor of his. "Why did you wait until my dad had gone? Or why didn't you wait longer—until after he was back? You ask me to give you the biggest promise a girl can give right after breaking your sworn promise to me."

"But there are circumstances which alter cases," he protested, also standing, facing her.



"And only circumstances can alter this one, Phil—circumstances which you will have to—"

"One circumstance is that I can't and won't wait around without knowing how I stand with you any longer," he interrupted, taking a step toward her, his eyes full of fire, his hands clinched where they hung at his sides. "Another circumstance would be that you— But surely, Glory, despite all your strange behavior and your fanatic devotion to that old termagant of a parent of yours, you do—you must love me. Dear, I can't exist without your love. I swear to you that I—I—"

His hands finished the expression of craving which his lips dared not frame. Stretching forward, they caught her by the wrists, moved up her arms to her shoulders, drew her toward his hard-hammering heart.

In a flash Gloriana remembered how only yesterday she had longed that he would compel her will to bend to his. But now that his passion for her was self-declared, his lips almost on hers for the sacrilege of a forced first kiss, a fury of resentment wrenched her out of his arms.

"*You* swear? Do you think I would trust your word again?" she exclaimed in a rapid, dangerous tone. "You have done just what my father said

you would do—have come here the minute he was gone like a—a—”

“Why don’t you finish? A sneak, do you mean?”

He spoke in a more controlled voice than she, but the blood had receded from his face, leaving it pale as his heavy tan would show.

“Don’t you touch me again! You have no right to assume so much when you—”

“So that is my answer?” His lips moved stiffly. “I lay aside all scruples because you are in danger. Longing to protect you, I make the only proposition which a gentleman can make. In return I am called a liar and a sneak.”

“Oh, not in such harsh words, Phil!”

As Gloriana saw the man she had heroized through all her girlhood years start toward the door, with the evident intent of leaving at once, a sudden fear of the lonely, cold by-path into which that flame off her heart had lighted their way compelled her.

“I want you to go, but not angry, not without understanding,” she said. “I am too much of a Frazer to listen to your question now.”

“Now? When will you listen—in our next incarnation?”

He had stopped and was looking, not into her

face, but at the wrapped braid of hair, thick as a puncher's wrist, which, with the lamplight strong upon it, looked like a crown of rubies and fine gold.

"When you have cut loose from your father, Phil. Maybe it sounds a hard thing for me to say, but I don't forgive him, any more than my dad does, for the things he has done. You must appreciate that before we can be—well, what you want. Either you must break with your father or I with mine. And you'll have to do the breaking, for mine is right and yours wrong. Why don't you strike out for yourself?"

He gave a short laugh. "I don't see that we should let the right or wrong of our ancestors spoil our lives. But, supposing we should, what could I do? Ranching is the only life I know and the only life in which you'd be happy, you glory of the range. The governor wouldn't hear to my starting up anywhere else. New work for an untrained man has to come in the nature of a plum, and I don't know anybody in the plum-ranching game."

It was the girl's turn to take an eager step toward him. Even during his short, temperate objection, a possible way to hand him that "plum" had come into her mind. The strain of her face

relaxed in hope—inspiration. To her mental vision a unique figure pointed the way, the figure of the sign-post man.

Since the government had chosen Seth Gilson and sent him out on the important work of the Geological Survey, he must be influential and more or less capable, despite his propensity for standing around and letting other folks—such as women and mules—get him out of the trouble into which he had got himself. She had been able to do him a service, perhaps as a means to this very end. Might she not assume the sincerity of his gratitude and ask him a favor in return? To reclaim was his profession. Why hadn't she seen that he was directly "sent" to help her reclaim what always she had considered her own?

"There are plenty of things besides ranching that a man can do in this day and degeneration," she said more lightly. "There are ways I might help after you once broke out of your warping home corral. Through a mutual acquaintance from outside, who has a broader view of—"

"Referring to the gentleman I met for the first time yesterday, whom, it would have seem, you have met before?" A strange, hostile expression had wiped out all gentleness from the handsome face. "From the way he looked at you he prob-

ably would be glad to devote his influence to getting me out of the way."

Gloriana caught his arm and lifted a flushed, lovely face. "Now, Phil, that's small of you to take a dislike to this government expert just because he—"

Throwing off the detaining hand, Strong crossed to the door. There he turned and faced her. His glare positively frightened her. He looked more enraged than she ever had seen him.

"Maybe I'm not as small as I look. I'll go now, since you have asked me to. I apologize for having come."

"But, Phil, won't you think it over? Naturally you took a dislike to Gilson yesterday because you—because he—"

Again she did not finish. The thrum of a motor was the only reply she got to the vehement questions aroused by Philip's scorn of her idea.

Was jealousy to spoil the opportunity she longed to give him? Had she been too hard on him, or was regret making her too easy? Was conflict so in the air that she and he, who hitherto had been able to live above even the parental feud, could never have a peaceful parting these days?

## CHAPTER XIII

### A HAPPY FAMILY

THE conviction that she had taken every precaution within her power to safeguard her self-imposed ranch trust sustained Gloriana against the fatigue of a long day in the saddle. Yet the blinking home lights never had been more welcome as she rode down upon them after topping the last rise. Her appetite was as active as her muscles were lax, and satisfaction for both was promised in that cook-shack window gleam.

Her first safety-step had followed immediately the unsatisfactory departure of Philip Strong, Jr. Her own suspicion of the fraudulent origin of the letter which had called her father away had convinced her that there was, indeed, some deep-laid scheme involved. The warning repeated by the young neighbor who had not yet qualified for that nearer relationship which she, as well as he, had long considered, pointed the direction from which trouble might be expected as surely as the needle of a compass turns north.

She smiled indulgently on recalling the first in-



cident of putting Blaze Ranch upon a defensive footing.

Straightway, after Phil's departure, she had sought the "caboose" and struck a light upon the outfit's only male. Looking like some scalped specter, T. Weed Gay sat up in his bunk, stared at her in half-awake alarm; then, on recognition, grabbed his wig from a shelf above the bunk and affixed it to his pate.

"What's happened to desecrate our righteous nocturnals?" he asked.

Without going into detail regarding the cause of alarm she appraised him of her decision that the market band—the middle ranch reds which were awaiting army inspection—must be night-guarded. At her expression of regret that his slumber must be disturbed, Tumble Weed sensed his election to this task.

Worthy his rawhide title the old-timer had proved himself. Calling her "old man"—far and wide the puncher's title for ranch owner—he had bade her worry not at all over his lost "beauty sleep." In that Cactus City jail, he assured her, he had made up all a handsome fellow like himself would need for months to come while awaiting the life or death convenience of the greaser he had punctured.

Her smile broadened at memory of his embarrassed shuffling of the bunk blankets and his delicate suggestion: "If you'll make yourself scarce outen here I'll habilitate my outer man and be on my way."

She had "scarced" herself back to the house, from where, in a surprisingly few minutes, she had heard the beat of hoofs in diminishing volume.

Again that morning she had awakened him at the shelter beside Looking-glass Spring, where he had resumed his rest when daybreak ended any danger from possible prowlers. One of her several duties had been the delivery of a supply of "grub," the nature of which he had dictated in farewell the night before.

"Just bring me the makings, old man, not cooked stuff. That female woman, Mary Ellen, has designs on me, even if she did call me a jail-bird. I'll do my own cooking, thank *you!*"

Gloriana felt great confidence in Tumble Weed, who, in emergency, had ridden a night-long stint on many a herd. He saw through the dark like an owl, had the sixth sense of an Apache for an alien presence and sheer courage that was not surpassed by the brutes of the desert who make the best out of the worst. Any one who came badgering those market band reds entrusted to his

care was likely to need all the good Lord's mercy on his soul.

Arriving at the stable, the new boss saw evidence in Flame's empty stall that Philomena had not yet returned. The line-fence ride, laid out as the first-day program of her forewoman, was long; in the ordinary course of it many things might have occurred to cause delay.

The sight of Mary Ellen, however, moving ponderously toward her across the yard, seemed a sign of some untoward happening. That whatever this might be was pleasing, the elated expression of the billowy face showed as soon as the shortened distance would allow.

"I've got 'em, Glory-girl!" the cook-lady confided in a stagy wheeze. "A pair of 'em, both able-bodied and one not bad for looks."

"A pair of what?"

"Just what you've been looking for they are, and the supper's a-cooking that will hog-tie them to this ranch for keeps; leastways, until our own folks get back. They happens along a while since, a-riding of Shank's mares. Onct I clapped eyes on 'em, says I to myself: 'Mary Ellen O'Grady, 'tis the Heaven-sent man-power we're needing, so look to it they don't get away from you!' "

The good soul's enthusiasm for her coup was mildly contagious, and Gloriana could not but feel a certain eagerness to look over the derelicts, even though she scarcely dared hope they would solve her next pressing problem.

"Men seem to be coming your way, Mary Ellen," she remarked as they hurried together toward the cookhouse. "Yesterday I came home to find you making love to Tumble Weed in the living-room, and to-night—"

"Love nothing! You won't be thinking of that gloom Gay when you see his betters what are waiting to join your outfit and save you wearing your looks to a frazzle, not to mention your clothes. These here are *men*, as I'm after telling you, the one of 'em a reg'ler tonic for sore eyes."

Perforce Gloriana took the romantic spinster's word for their virtues until she could make her own appraisal. This began on entering the oblong room in which the Blaze Ranch family, whether large or small, gathered to general meals. Her initial glance showed Mary Ellen to have been accurate in her first premise—the men who waited numbered two. Both were young and beardless, the stubble of their chins obviously due to neglect rather than design. One was tall and slender of build, as showed when he arose from

his seat at the table on her entrance, a vague smile on his weak, sallow face. The other was decidedly chunky and made no move from the two chairs upon which he had settled himself. The face which he turned toward her was distinguished by an evil look, a disfiguring scar and high cheekbones.

The daughter of old Blaze Frazer needed no second glance to tell her that these were not ranch-hands, trained to the care of either cattle or horses. Their garb was rough enough to have listed them as sheepmen strayed from their flocks; yet, by signs not altogether visible, she knew that they were not "woolies." From the nervous manner of the slim wayfarer, whose hands were soft-looking and white except for certain fingers stained from nicotine, as also from the assurance of the heavier, she deduced that they were not plains-bred.

"Evening, ma'am!" said he of the politeness to rise. "We've been waiting your return."

"Leave me do the ragging, Smith," came interruption from his companion, who, although electing himself spokesman, did not take the trouble to remove the pipe from between his prominent, yellowed teeth. "I'm Jasper Jones, lady—you can call me Jazz for short. Let me meet you to

my friend Spider Smith, one of the best young lightweighters in the ring. He's kee-rect, which is seldom, in saying that we was waiting for you. For another fact, the little girl out there sort of insisted on our sticking around for a spell."

He jerked a thumb in the general direction of the partition-formed kitchen, from which Mary Ellen could be heard putting final, noisy touches to the supper.

"You were sent me by some one who knew I needed help?"

Gloriana put the question in the hope of obtaining as soon as possible some recommendation other than personal appearance from which to consider the applicants. Neither was prepossessing, and the value of their service in Blaze saddles might well be questioned, although she had to remind herself that when it came to punchers she was in the beggar class.

"Nope!" answered Jasper, puffing cloudily from his pipe. "Nobody sent us. We were just sifting along and dropped in to get the time of day. Baby elephant yonder told us how you were up against it for he-men. We allowed—Spider and me—that we might be open to a proposition in case you looked good to us. You sure do, and it ain't right, noway, that delicate dames



should have the run of a great big ranch like this."

Less than before did the young "boss" like the situation. Overzealous from her desire to re-enforce the ranch, Mary Ellen had erred in judgment in admitting the tramps. Nor had matters been helped by the contributed information of their manless plight. Yet she was not alarmed, from force of habit believing in her ability to rise to emergency. Moreover, reënforcement of weight and initiative must surely be on the way in the guise of Mena Miracle, who was worth two average men.

As Mary Ellen, her interest in the not-bad-looker evidencing growth, had begun to load the supper-table, Gloriana decided that her invitation should not be withdrawn. Hospitable to a fault, she could not bring herself to turn the strangers out once they had been asked in. During the course of the meal, moreover, they might show redeeming qualities which would justify her in offering them provisional employment.

Her silence evidently disturbed the spokesman. He removed his feet from the second chair, and turned toward where she stood before the glass, sombrero removed, corralling stray locks of her splendid hair.

"Jumbo's daughter wasn't feeding us the bull

about this being a ladies'-only ranch?" he demanded.

"I'm running it, if that's what you mean," answered Gloriana, her manner offhand, although the question seemed added warning to be on guard. "Of course we have men to do the actual work with the horses and mules."

For a moment a scowl darkened the scarred face. She could not determine just what the look meant—suspicion, disappointment, what not. Quickly, however, what must have been intended for a smile accentuated his disfigurement.

"Don't let your sex worry you—it don't us, girlie."

She turned, startled and angered by his familiarity.

"I am Miss Frazer," she advised him, "when you find it necessary to address me."

"A bit fine and flippety, eh?" he laughed. "That's all right, Miss Frazer—no harm meant, so none's done."

"Grub's piled!"

Mary Ellen's triumphant announcement cut short any embarrassment in the ensuing pause.

The response from the two, whose names probably were neither Smith nor Jones, was prompt. They were already eating by the time Gloriana

took her seat at the head of the table, and Mary Ellen, the last platter placed, lowered herself carefully into hers.

That the food was honored in silence, so far as concerned conversation, meant nothing more than that all were hungry. The creator of the meal was satisfied with the tribute to her art; the hostess had sat through many such gastronomic bouts before. Chiefly she was wondering what could have kept Foreman Mena.

At meal's end the guests sighed a duet of complete satisfaction, then lighted pipe and cigarette.

"Some cook!" complimented the "tonic for sore eyes."

"Yea, bo!" voted the scar-faced spokesman in a quite audible aside. "The eats get by for certain, sure. It's a shame to take the money from a couple of innocent children what—"

"Not to mention biting the hand that feeds you," interrupted Spider gloomily.

The look of inquiry which pierced the gloom was discountenanced by the glare of him to whom it had been directed.

"Keep off the poetry stuff, poor simp!" Noisily Jazz Jones began to stack the dishes before him, as if to cover an impulse of which he was ashamed.

"What were you about to say?" Gloriana could not resist an out-loud attempt to fathom the nondescript pair. "What was it about biting Mary Ellen's hand?"

"Don't you pay no heed to young rent-and-rusty, duchess," the thick-set visitor answered for his companion. "He ain't responsible when his teeth is hurting after eats."

From a pocket of his worn, misfit coat he drew a watch, into the face of which he winked facetiously—a watch wafer-thin it was, gold-cased, expensive out of all keeping with the wearer's general appearance. Its possession denied the excuse offered for their call, "to get the time of day."

Gloriana, spurred by more acute suspicion, began to think of defense. Her meaning frown, calculated to warn her ally, however, was lost upon Mary Ellen, plodding heavily kitchenward.

"Spider, where's your manners?" the Jones person demanded. "Make tracks out there and help your lady friend with the dishes. Miss Frazer and me have got business to chin over."

The slim tramp did not look overly pleased at the assignment, but opened no question of obedience. He followed the pleased giggle of the cook.

"Well?" demanded Gloriana, incensed anew by the managerial air of Jones and the familiarity of his stare, doubtless meant to be propitiating.

"I've decided for Spider and me," he said. "Because of the eats and your good looks and several other considerations, we'll settle down and help you out. As I said before the feed, ranching ain't no work for a couple of frail women, even if one of them ain't so frail as the Spider would probably like. Personally, I prefer my lady friends all dolled up and helpless—ruffles and swishy skirts and lots of cologne, you know. But Spider and me, we'll run things for you—a happy little family of four."

He laughed throatily at this conclusion, evidently considering it a quip. So pleased he was with himself that he did not notice the change which had darkened Gloriana's face. Before she could bring him to book for his insolence, however, there came interruption from the kitchen.

"Here, you!" wheezed Mary Ellen's voice. "Leave go of me!"

There followed the thud of a blow. The clatter of broken china upon the floor told with what it had been struck.

Springing to her feet, Gloriana rushed for the opening in the partition, but did not gain it.

Unfortunately she passed within reach of Jasper Jones.

She felt one shoulder seized in a grip that hurt. Surprise and the force of his hold spun her half around. The next second the thug's free arm closed around her and she was drawn into a hideous embrace.

The scar on the face pressed close against hers seemed to be searing her own cheek as she struggled vainly with all her strength.

"Don't mind them, pet," was rasped into her ear. "You and me is all what counts just now. We'll seal up with a clingy kiss—the sort—you never—forget."

The pressure of his left arm tightened like a vise; the hand of the other slid upward toward her head. She tried but could not reach the automatic hidden in the pocket of her riding pants; she could not even draw back her elbow for the fist blow which his insult deserved, so closely was she held.

There could be no doubt that this uncouth stranger, this road-runner, meant to make good his threat—actually to *kiss* her.

"Might as well pay up first as last, you beauty," he exulted. "It won't be half bad. Why, you'll come begging for my osculations before you're



through; they all do. Just an inch more, hon—yield just one more inch.”

Perforce, he moved back his head to avoid the defensive arm which, in desperation, she had worked upward between their bodies. Her moment had come.

The fingers of her hand, Nature's readiest weapon, drew into a claw. With all her strength rushing to their tips, she drove her nails into his cheek. A wrist strengthened by years of roping drew the claw downward. Blood began to ooze from the furrows in the loose flesh.

With a bellow of pain, "Jazz" released her and sprang back out of reach.

"You damned wildcat! I'll choke the breath out of—"

His threat ended in a gurgle not from the smart of scratches. A third eye glared at him—this the black one of a gun, round, open, an invitation to prayer.

## CHAPTER XIV

### OUT OF THE DARK

GLORIANA's backward step was not in retreat, but to give her room for free aim.

"Down, you horned toad—get down on the floor where you belong!"

She sparred for a moment in which to recover from the shudder of his touch—to decide upon the punishment she should inflict, now that the gun hand was hers. Intent upon this mental search for penalty befitting the offense, she gave no heed to the fact that all sound of battle in the kitchen had ceased.

"Have a heart, lady," pleaded Jones, dabbing at his cheek with a handkerchief. "I was only joshing, like I've done before with many and many's the girl. I wasn't meaning to do anything if you really didn't—"

"Crook your knees!"

The automatic repeated its invitation to prayer.

Converted to its will, he sank. "You've spoiled my looks for life! Ain't you satisfied?" he whimpered.

"Now," she ordered, "flatten out on your belly like the snake you are!"

A plan of revenge was taking form in her mind. It was not that, after he had assumed the serpent's lowly estate, she should soil the heel of her riding boot by grinding him under foot. That would not have satisfied the finer of the senses he had outraged. First she would frisk him for possible weapons; then, by power of the trusty persuader she held, would force him literally to crawl.

A flashed glance mapped his course across the floor, through the door, and down the steps. Outside, a plot of flowering *bisnaga*, the especial pride of Mary Ellen, graced the yard in lieu of other bloom. Through this he should drag himself. In the bed of quills, sharper than those of a porcupine, he should writhe and beg her pardon until she felt appeased.

"Ain't you got no heart at all?"

The mumble of his appeal, the almost ludicrous terror in his small eyes, the lips drawn back so brutishly—all this was to her but an advance upon the debt he should pay in full.

"Get down; crawl!" With the weapon she punctuated her command.

In the same second several things happened.

The most frightsome was the seizure of her

gun wrist from behind. With it, he who had seemed so utterly in her power flattened out on the floor as she had ordered, but in doing so grasped her ankles.

She pressed the trigger of the automatic.

Its report and the crash of its bullet boring an inoffensive window-pane only mocked her. She felt her feet being drawn from under her; felt her arms pulled back. On a chance, she fired again, merely to puncture the partition. The next sound was her own heavy fall to the floor.

The impact must have stunned her, for she found her position materially changed, although by no means for the better, when consciousness returned. She first sensed that she was tightly bound and on her feet. She could feel the cut of rope wherever she tried to move—across her breast, about her waist, over her ankles. Opening her lids ever so slightly, that she might have the advantage of a secret survey, she comprehended in part what had happened to her.

They must have laid her upon the cleared supper table, wrapped her round and round with the rope, then tilted the table on edge. Only thus could she account for her upright, bound position in a room that was without posts.

Her fingers closed upon a strand of the rope.

It was of finely woven horsehair. The touch brought an ironical suspicion. Her covert glance focused upon a certain wooden peg near the outside door. It was empty.

"Daddy Blaze's rope," she thought, with a shudder that was as much for his feelings, could he have known, as for her own predicament. "They've taken his sacred string for *this!*"

The thugs entered from the kitchen, where the chunky one evidently had been bathing his face. She closed her eyes, held her breath.

"What did you do with the old baby, Spider?" Gloriana's especial tormentor asked.

"She bounced a platter on my bean, then beat it for the open. She was padding somewhere in a hell of a hurry the last I seen of her. I came back to find out how you was faring with your latest victim, and just in time to enjoy the beginning of your creeping exercise."

"That hellcat!" muttered he who had been scratched.

From between her lashes Glory saw him consult his watch; saw the younger one approach and glance at it, too, an anxious look on his face.

"Time she came out of it," Spider threw over his shoulder. "Hope we haven't croaked her. We don't want to go too far, Jazz—not in this

man's country." He leaned closer. "She's still breathing, but—"

"Course she's breathing—ain't cats got at least nine lives? Get a dipper of water and give her a douse. 'Time' is right—I want her to be to home in her belfry when I collect."

Deciding to spare herself the water cure, Gloriana opened wide her eyes.

"Playing possum on us, sister?" remarked Spider, showing relief.

The rougher thug stamped forward and glared at her.

"Scratched a little deeper than you meant to, didn't you, pet?" he taunted. "How do you feel now about that there *ca*-ress you was just about giving me when your claws slipped? Them lips of yours get a niftier red each second. I guess they're ripe enough for picking now."

Never before could Gloriana Frazer remember having been in an utterly helpless position. Roped to the board, she could move neither hand nor foot. She seemed absolutely in their power. Yet the spirit within her—that undying spirit which had given her father the sobriquet of "Blaze"—was far from quenched. The flash of it sent forth by her tiger eyes caused her tormentor to hesitate.



"Don't you come near me, reptile!" she cried, appreciating the value of every second which might bring the return of Mary Ellen, who could not be on any craven stampede, or of Philomena, booted for the most practical sort of miracle. "By now help is coming on horseback, and I promise that the very life shall be dragged out of you if you so much as touch me again."

"Help's coming, is it?" he sneered, taking a step nearer. "Them *ca*-resses are coming, you mean."

"Where do you think the cook went if not to arouse the men?"

"Quit your bluffing, little heller," he chided. "There ain't a man within miles, and the baby elephant's wind will play out before she gets half way. Me for what's long overdue!" He pressed his palm against the wounded cheek, which evidently had not ceased to pain at least his pride.

Spider laid a hand on his companion's arm. "That ain't in the contract, Jazz. Better call enough plenty."

"That's enough and plenty both from an insect like you!" snapped Jones, throwing off the detaining clutch. "You'd ought to know by this time that I never start what I can't finish. The osculation of this here fiend is begun, and os-

culated she'll be—despite all hell and Arizona.”

As he started determinedly toward her, Gloriana screamed. Even though realizing the probable futility of the cry, inwardly condemning it as a sign of feminine hysteria, she screamed and screamed again.

As if in answer, the outside door which she faced flung open. Some one entered the room as though shot from a spring-board. He paused for no word of explanation, scarcely a questioning look. It would seem that the sight of her roped to the table gave reason for all that followed and to spare.

## CHAPTER XV

### INTO THE LIGHT

So rapid was the action of the next few minutes that Gloriana with difficulty followed it, even though she could turn her head freely. Watch intently as she might, impelled by her vital personal interest in the conflict's issue, certain features of it remained vague.

For instance, she could not tell whether Jazz Jones crumpled to the floor from the impact of that first rush or from a well-directed accompanying blow. There was satisfaction enough, however, in the fact that he did go promptly down.

"What you so rough about?" came in a snarled protest as he struggled to a hunched position.

What sort of treatment did the bully expect when caught red-handed? Gloriana exultingly asked the question of herself. Did he think for a moment, even a dazed one, that a real man would lay a gently restraining hand upon his shoulder and beg him to desist?

She turned to watch the further moves of him to whom Mary Ellen's earlier misplaced term of "Heaven sent man-power" might have been fittingly applied.

Scorning preliminary feint, her unexpected defender closed next upon Spider, who appeared strangely off guard until a fist crashed into his face to open his eyes. Thus rudely awakened, he side-stepped a second blow, countering with his left as he slid into the middle of the room.

"This ain't him, Jazz!" he hissed to his pal, who was still on all-fours. "Pull up and hit hard for a get-away, you crawler!"

Whom the pair had expected Gloriana could not imagine; still, that didn't matter much. What did matter was that Seth Gilson had appeared from nowhere to fight out her cause. The war he waged was sincere and rapid enough to discourage mere defensive in those who evidently had at first thought him some accomplice in looting the ranch. No time was there now for Jazz to consult that gentleman's watch of his, to cast those expectant glances toward the door.

The Nemesis who had rushed upon them so unceremoniously seemed in a good deal of a hurry to finish them off. Somehow an inspirational confidence had replaced Gloriana's former scorn

for the Government agent's inefficacy. Although the odds were doubled against him, she felt no doubt of the battle's end.

Why he did not draw his six-gun, if he still carried it, she could not imagine; but he certainly was keeping right after the younger crook. Blow followed blow, evidently in the hope of battering down his skilfully maintained guard and landing a swing that would floor him. Well matched were the two in height and reach. Weight slightly favored Gilson, and the superior boxing skill which the Spider quickly demonstrated was countered by what seemed a reckless fury in the assailant.

Not until after a heavy upward cut to the "not-bad-looker's" chin, which sent him on a backward reel, did Jazz achieve his feet.

"A gun!" cried Gloriana, in alarm, straining anew at the uncompromising ropes. "The other one's pulling a gun!"

But the surveyor had seen the move which threatened his advantage. All in an age-long second his right gripped the back of a chair. This his long arm swung in an arc, past the Spider, to a landing upon Jones's head.

The weapon spoke, it is true, but with a mis-directed aim that sent its lead into the shoulder of

the thin scamp. Howling with pain, Spider sank to the floor in complete collapse.

With both rogues down—Jazz in a “pass-away,” the lightweight clawing at his shoulder—Gilson possessed himself of the gun, as a precaution against any sudden miraculous recovery. Not until then did he give attention to the girl.

“Your home ranch is quite a bit livelier than I expected,” he said with the wraith of a grin. “Do you give all your invited guests a show on this order? But probably you’ll feel more like the chat you promised when I’ve cut the ropes away.”

From his pocket he produced a knife; opening it, advanced. The shake of her head at sight of the blade seemed to surprise him, certainly stopped him.

“This rope they used belongs to my father. I—I promised to keep it safe against his return. Isn’t there time for the knots?”

Satisfying himself by an overshoulder glance that no immediate activity need be feared from the huddle in the corner of the room, Gilson set about the task. In the untying of knots the last is usually the first to receive attention, and this last-first proved to be of the variety known as “hard.”

The application of his teeth proved necessary



to conquer the snarl. As his head lowered to a necessary resting-place against her breast, Gloriana subconsciously noticed two things which she afterward pondered. His cowlick was the crookedest, the most stubborn she ever had seen, and the pulse in the wrist that touched her as he worked throbbed in a violent way not altogether accounted for by his recent exercise.

When, that knot undone, he lifted his head, his clean, white teeth were pressed hard against his lower lip. Although he glanced into her eyes when he spoke, his were even duller and more impossible to read than before.

"Now we'll make better time," he said, applying his fingers to other hard knots.

"How come you added to my list of to-night's surprises?" she asked. "Your arrival was almost too timely to seem true, especially when I thought you away out on the desert."

"The posting of the Solemncholy is finished, and I was returning to take up the next phase of my work. Feeling a brief respite due me, I remembered that reward visit, and here I am."

"But you exploded in as if—"

"Turning into the yard—Alonzo, Hercules and I—we were greeted by a literally upset lady who had been trying, against the odds of a few

superfluous pounds, to hoist herself onto a horse that wasn't polite enough to conceal his objections. A second or so after informing us that murder was being done within the shack she collapsed upon 'Lonzo. Needless to add, he was incapacitated, so you must excuse his failure to answer your screams. There, part of you at least is free!"

The rope had fallen away to her waist. With a sigh of relief Gloriana stretched out both arms to restore their circulation.

"That was Mary Ellen, our cook, you met in the yard. She had set out for help. She usually puts over what she starts to do."

Gilson smiled in a sly way.

"She certainly put it or herself or something over on Alonzo. I say, better lie low there!"

The sharp advice was not to her, but sent over his shoulder toward the corner, whither a movement on the part of Jazz had drawn his attention.

"Suppose you let me hold the gun while you finish with the rope," she suggested. "Oh, you needn't be afraid—I wouldn't let even a popgun go off unless I meant it to. I was right stupid in allowing them to disarm me a while back, but I'm not stupid enough to treat you as anything but a real friend—ever—again."

*"Noblesse oblige."*

He was not smiling now; in fact, looked quite serious. He handed over the weapon he had taken from Jazz and bent again to his work.

The arrival of Alonzo Funk, a moment later, was proclaimed in advance by the sobs of the burden under the half-support of which he staggered.

Just inside the door Mary Ellen O'Grady righted herself for a wobbly survey of the situation. When her eyes focused upon Gloriana she brushed Gilson aside that she might sob out her regret over having shown such impotency in a time of stress.

"I was sc-cared," she whimpered, "plumb scared, Glory-girl; but if that cayuse would have stood still—"

"Yes, yes," soothed her half-freed mistress. "You did all that possibly could be expected of you. Now, if you'll stand back, Mr. Gilson will have me loose in one of your jiffies. And if you feel strong enough, you might heat some water. We're going to need it shortly."

She gestured toward Spider, writhing on the floor.

"For them murtherers?"

"One of them is wounded—must be cared for."

"Sure, he'd ought to be dead, both of him!"

And if the cook-lady's scowl could have killed, the names of Jazz Jones and Spider Smith must straightway have been added to Arizona's annual casualty list.

As she waddled toward the kitchen the Government man resumed his interrupted task.

Alonzo Funk, expert of desert wastes rather than waists of womenkind, brushed back his silvery hair, righted a chair, and sat himself down with the manner of one whose nerves, as well as muscles, had been strained.

Scarcely had Gilson finished his task and Gloriana stepped free from her table top, when both were startled by the sound of hurrying feet without. The surveyor straightened against the need of further action. The girl, remembering how the tramps had seemed to be expecting a third, held her gun ready, determined that there should be no more half-measures.

But at sight of the couple who appeared in the open doorway her arm relaxed.

In the lead was Timothy Rudd, of the Eureka Stable, he to whom she had refused the sale of Blaze reds and the rental of the ranch. His expression was most resentful—this accounted for by the fact that the muzzle of a revolver dented the small of his back.

The holder of the weapon, Philomena Miracle, loomed behind him, looking very much a fore-man, what with black hair entirely concealed by the sweeping brim of her hat, legs encased by trousers tucked into high boots, spurs jangling at the slightest movement of her "extra" heels. Indeed, the only hint of her femininity was given in the reek of her favorite perfume, which had survived the hours spent in the open with the strength of a disinfectant.

"Jumping Jupiter!" she remarked, after a startled glance around.

The surveyor sent one of his amiable smiles Gloriana's way.

"It would seem that I called the turn when I spoke of *all* your invited guests. This is *some* party."

"That personage," Gloriana announced *soto voce*, as her right-hand woman strode over to examine the human flotsam in the corner, "is the real owner of the name you called me that first day—Miss Miracle."

He showed no concern that any young woman should be born to such an odd and ambitious title. He was looking at Gloriana meditatively.

"It was stupid of me not to recognize you at once. Truth is, I didn't appreciate who you really

were until after you had gone. I'd been expecting you for some time. But of that anon."

Philomena's voice, raised in complaint, demanded attention.

"Thought I was bringing the party, deary. But, hell's fire and brimstone, we're too late arriving! Still, you can make room for another or two. Ain't there cake and sauce enough to go 'round? I feel sort of responsible for this guest, seeing as how I made him come."

Her finish had a triumphant ring and she waved a long-barrel persuader.

"*Made* me come?" The horse-trader gave her a glance of contempt. "You did nothing of the sort. I was on my way here when I encountered you, worse luck. I had business with Miss Frazer, so I just naturally came along."

"You just naturally did," sneered his captor. "Why, you near-man, there wasn't any doubt of your coming, once I had the drop on you, any more than there was about the giving up of your bull-whip to Glory Frazer the other day! You've learned how to mind us females, I reckon!"

Although with a smile, Gloriana protested further recrimination.

"I can't think of any one more welcome than Mr. Timothy Rudd," she said pleasantly.



*"Welcome?"*

Philomena and Gilson joined in the resentful duet.

The Eureka man lifted his head hopefully, interest lessening the choler of his expression. He cleared his throat, as if to take advantage of this fortuitous, if unexpected reception.

"Welcome, yes; you heard me," reiterated Gloriana. "You see, his arrival saves me a whole lot of exertion. It really is a great relief. Now I won't have to ride into Rabbit Ear to settle this ranch misunderstanding. We can close our deal right here."

Consternation froze the faces of her friends. Surely a Frazer was not going to back down from a stand once taken with such public show of determination and for so righteous a cause!

Rudd himself could not conceal his amaze at this quenching of the young fire-brand, although a confident smile stretched his lips. True to his schooling of sand and solitude, Alonzo Funk alone of her immediate audience showed no perturbation.

The trader was the first to speak, but not until after he had cast a hesitant glance into the corner where the discomfited thugs were making themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

"I'm ready to talk turkey—as we say in

Missouri—any time you are, Miss Frazer. Hoped to find you alone, but don't mind witnesses if you don't. Let's sit down and thresh out our little spat in a friendly spirit, letting bygones be bygones."

"And sleeping dogs lie, I suppose," burst from Seth Gilson, unable longer to restrain some comment at the horse-bully's effrontery.

The look he sent Gloriana was at once an exhortation not to yield unnecessarily and an assurance of his support should it be required in further combat.

A bristling invective from Philomena carried the same double meaning.

"Yes, let's sit down—a good suggestion." The young boss seemed obliviously complacent. "We have a lot to talk over, but first I'd like to hear Mena's report."

She righted another of the overturned chairs and waved the trader a gesture of invitation toward it. After a glance at the upturned extension table, she evidently decided against its immediate replacement. The room was too much of a wreck from the double battle to be put in order then.

Scorning a chair, Philomena planted herself against the wall. One arm she V'd to rest upon

one hip. The other, with revolver dangling, she held free for gesticulation.

"The first I knowed that something unusual was doing hereabouts," she began, "was when I come acrost a couple of saddle-dressed nags hid out in that aspen thicket just beyond Ripple Creek. I never thought of the missing riders troubling Glory and Mary Ellen, calculating they was off scouting the lay of the market band for some chap-flapping stampede, or other devilment. So I cachéd Flame and laid for their return. My stomach was getting out of patience with my mouth when all to onct I seen this *hombre*—"

Her gun-point indication of Rudd caused his whole body to squirm so noticeably that he could steady it only by clutching the seat of his chair on both sides.

The forewoman smiled her gratification and continued:

"The minute I seen this here man from the show-me state, riding like he was on a sneak and looking for something that—"

"I was looking for a trail to the ranch-house," interrupted the horse-trader indignantly. "I'd lost my way trying to make a short cut, as you very well know, hyena. Didn't I tell you exactly—"

"Shut up! Who's making this dod-blasted report, you or me?" Mena interrupted in turn. "Say, folks, I nearly scared him offen his saddle when I stepped out with a pressing invite to loft his hands. He looked and talked and acted so suspicious to me that I brought him in and them other horses, too, never thinking I was coming to a love-feast. And that's my first report and my last if I drop dead the next—"

Philomena was destined not to finish the oath.

"And they said this was no-man's ranch!"

The comment—the first from either of the stranded derelicts since the party had swelled in numbers—issued gruffly from Jazz Jones.

All eyes followed his startled stare toward the door. There another guest stood looking in confusedly.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A MAN'S WAY

"WHY, Phil— However in the world—" Only one moment did Gloriana hesitate; the next she rose and stepped forward with outstretched hand, quite as though receiving a frequent and honored visitor. "My friends sure know when to rally!"

Accepting both greeting and hand with a grateful glance, young Strong advanced into the center of the room and gazed about at the scene of general disorder—upturned table standing in a tangle of rope; broken and overthrown chairs; "Winged Victory," the plaster prize of Mary Ellen, shattered in a hundred bits upon the floor.

He did not answer the unfinished questions directly. During a brief, indignant pause his dark eyes rested upon the human instruments of ruction, who by now had propped themselves against the wall; next swerved with a glare to the stable owner from Rabbit Ear.

"Tim Rudd—I thought so! What that's unholy have you been doing here?"

"Doing nothing so unholy as you seem to think, young fellow," replied the trig sharper, his wagon still hitched to that star of the boss' welcome.

Strong turned from him with ill-concealed disdain. The full force of his attention settled upon the girl.

"Thank God, you're safe!" he exclaimed in another voice.

"And how did you know I was in danger? Was it telepathy or—"

"I'd been milling over that matter we have under discussion." He faced her directly, his tone and look ardent as though they two were alone in the room. "Had started out in my car for a long, quiet drive to town and back, during which my head would get cool and I could think. But it seems there's no cooling down for me.

"Just outside our gate I met that Apache—Always or Sometimes or Never Busy, whatever his joker of a name may be. He was coming to find me, it developed. For once he'd been loafing around to some advantage, and had held me up to report that he'd seen a couple of roughs headed this way. I didn't dare doubt the truth of it,



and didn't care whether you'd appreciate my coming or not.

"In the emergency I just chucked all rules and regulations into the dust and was getting top speed from the buggy, when a tire blew out and sent her into the ditch with a broken axle. Had to come the rest of the way on foot, or I'd have been here in time."

"Fortunately Mr.— Fortunately somebody else arrived in time." Gloriana caught her words with a nervous laugh. "I had help a-plenty, as a one-eyed lizard could see by Exhibits A and B in yonder corner."

"Gilson again, eh?" commented Strong, giving his recent antagonist a positively grateful glance. "He's put me in his debt this time, but I do wish there'd been enough left in him to polish off Tim Rudd, too. Remember I warned you what to expect from that quarter? He ought to be tarred and—"

He broke off in amazement. Was Gloriana's smile, which had broken like sunlight at his change of manner toward the surveyor, actually turning toward the horseman?

Gilson and Philomena exchanged exasperated glances. It seemed that they were back where they had been before the new arrival.

"Oh, you mustn't jump at conclusions against Mr. Rudd," the girl protested.

Philomena's unfeminized "damn" was a groan and her spur rowel dug a scar into the wainscoting that would last as long as the wood.

"Mr. Rudd was not here when the battle was on, Phil," Gloriana continued. "He isn't a woman-fighter—oh, my, no! Not when he can hire others and send them ahead to do the rough work for him."

Her mid-speech change of tactics electrified her audience, even as it caused him so tardily accused to spring half out of his chair in surprise. His fingers gripped and ungripped spasmodically in amaze or guilt—or perhaps a combination of both.

"That's the real Glory Frazer shouting now!" cheered Philomena, reaching out in her relief to clap Gilson on the shoulder.

"What—what do you mean, young woman?" Rudd was now on his feet. "Hire others? Send specimens like these to make trouble for you? Do you accuse me of that?"

"It's not necessary for me to accuse," she said, fixing him with an uncompromising stare. "Circumstances have attended to that for me."

The shock of the girl's reversion to type passing away, the trader's anger mounted.

"Then you ain't meaning to hand over the ranch and nags like your father agreed?"

"Not to any Fourth-of-July brute like you."

"Say, miss, you can't play with me like this and get away with it!"

His protest was a threat.

Seth Gilson moved interestedly toward him. "Miss Frazer can play anything from high finance to mumbly-peg with you if she likes—and win. But she won't like. You're welcome here just long enough to answer some few questions truthfully. Here's the first one: How much did you promise to pay yonder pair of deuces for to-night's outrage?"

The horseman evidently considered the policy of silence; then, on appraisal of the threatening temperature, thought better of it.

"I never laid eyes on them two, so help me!" he again declared.

"Of course no one believes you. I'll put question two: How far did you tell them to go?"

Gloriana had spoken, her mind on the personal indignity so nearly forced upon her by the scar-faced crook.

"How could I tell them anything when I never so much as seen them?" Rudd looked increasingly innocent.

"Then what the heck were you snooping around the aspens for?" prodded Philomena. "Didn't you trust them to do their worst?"

For answer Rudd glared at her, plainly still most resentful over having been brought in at the point of a woman's gun.

"Look at them, deary," suggested the forewoman, moving again into the foreground. "Would you trust that breed? I see what Timothy's game was—a doubleheader. He planned to arrive when the scare was at its height, and rush in to earn the lady's gratitude by driving off the fake villains with a fake fight."

Gloriana nodded. "You've hit the bull's-eye, Mena. They timed the whole thing by the watch. When Mr. Gilson happened in they didn't start to fight in earnest until they saw he was not their employer. Why, the one that calls himself Jazz complained of being treated too *rough*!"

Looking impressed by these deductions, the surveyor made inquiry as to the second head of the "double."

"You need a diagram of that?" Strong interrupted; and himself supplied it in brief. "Rudd wants control of Miss Frazer's ranch. The scare was to convince her that for women to run it isn't a safe proposition. The rescue stunt as planned

was calculated to put her under an obligation which would wipe out her aversion for his cruelty to animals. You got here first, lucky dog, and spilled his well-cooked beans by giving the plug-uglies a beating that I hope was a real one. Thanks to Mena of the Miracles, here, poor Timothy from Missouri didn't have a chance to show what hero stuff is in him!"

The trader's native shrewdness reasserted itself.

"Sounds convincing, Strong, but it don't prove nothing on me." He turned to Gloriana. "Reckon you're too upset to talk business to-night. We couldn't get far nohow, with all these busy-bodies around. I'll be moving along and let you hear from my attorney."

The assurance with which he spoke was so breath-taking that he actually had passed out the door before Gilson clapped a detaining hand upon his shoulder.

"Maybe our cornered rough-necks have not had a good look at you," he suggested. "If they were the least bit anxious about their pay, now, they might consider this an auspicious moment for collection. Far be it from me to deprive them of the opportunity. Come back inside."

The fact that the sharper obeyed willingly banished any hope which Gilson might have had

for circumstantial results from this move. Both Jazz and Spider looked non-committal.

Strong stepped close to the pair and urged them to give evidence against Rudd, promising his best offices with the judge and district attorney, whom he knew well.

"I wouldn't turn State's for no man," grumbled Jazz, "not even if I could, which I can't."

"Rudd is a newcomer here—he can't help you out of this mess," urged the young cowman.

"Who's asking him to?" demanded Spider, with a groan for his wounded shoulder. "Nobody hired us, and if we got to cutting up a bit too lively, blame it on your desert air."

When Foreman Mena's threats of summary punishment, freely offered in her most unfeminine invective, failed to bring a "squeal," the effort was abandoned by common consent. Perhaps from her disappointment came an idea which, at the moment, seemed inspired.

"Them horses that brought the mangy coyotes are standing outside. Mightn't the Eureka brand on their rumps look like the missing link?"

The lantern-lighted search which was immediately instituted, however, developed no telltale markings. The horses proved to be scrawny, ill-kempt cayuses, in no way distinctive. They had



changed hands many times, according to the hair-burned alphabet upon their hides, but none of the letter combinations denoted regional ownership.

The surveyor had elected himself to stand guard over the prisoners during the search, and the indifferent look on their faces had advised him before a verbal report of its failure.

"Although that don't prove anything," Strong was saying to Gloriana as they reentered the shack. "He's a horse-trader, isn't he? Who could keep track of the animals that sift through his corral?"

Seth Gilson nodded agreement, but added: "At that, we'll have to let Rudd go for lack of evidence. If he has any sense at all, he'll read to-night's scribble on the wall and let lady ranchers alone." He fixed his vague glance upon the suspect. "One more little movement in this direction will have a meaning of its own—for you. Better go now, before somebody among those present forgets that there is law in Arizona."

"I consider I've been outrageously treated," Rudd sputtered as he moved toward the door.

"Chamber the chatter, for I'm forgetting fast," Philomena shrilled after him. "Beat it while the beating's good!"

Evidently the betrousered brunette's advice appealed, for the least popular of the uninvited

guests made his exit at a bound and disappeared into the night.

"Here's your water—hot as bilin' will make it," announced Mary Ellen from the partition opening, just when everybody had utterly forgotten her existence.

"Will you ever be as early as you always are late?" wailed Philomena at the cook. "A moment ahead instead of behind, and we could a-scalded that buzzard's tail-feathers."

The real need for which the water had been ordered relieved Mary Ellen of her steaming burden. Gloriana repaired to the medicine-chest for gauze and antiseptic, while Gilson, as self-appointed first-aid, cut away the Spider's shirt and exposed his wound to examination.

"Does it look serious?" asked the ranch girl, merciful in spite of her wrongs.

"A muscle wound—painful but not dangerous. The bullet passed nearly through and the entrance is clean as a whistle. He'll live to be hung."

"Can't I help you?"

"I protest," inserted Strong, clutching her arm. "You mustn't touch the viper after what he's done."

"But this one showed some decent feelings," Gloriana insisted.

Once again Gilson showed hearty agreement with his former adversary and waved her away. She continued to watch his manipulations, however, wondering at the change in the man whom she had so lately criticised for standing around while women and mules helped him out of difficulty. Indeed, he was showing plenty of initiative to-night!

His thin, strong fingers were making short work of the operation, when protest came from the wounded man.

"It hurts like sin!"

"That's proper, considering how you came by it," chuckled Gilson. "If it keeps you awake all night, it will at least teach you to raise your price for rough-housing defenseless women."

"Defenseless—hell!" grumbled Jazz, who sat looking on at the temporary repair of his misdirected aim.

As Gilson worked, he could not help overhearing the hot-headed young ranchman, whose trail seemed bound to cross his own, speaking in a meek-spirited aside.

"I never suffered so much in my life, dear girl, as coming over from Emerald, so don't scold me for my second offense. Flimsy as were the foundations for my fears—only a busybody In-

dian's chance sight of a couple of strangers headed this way—it brought me a nightmare of alarms. I simply can't think calmly where you are concerned. And there's no use in my trying to stay angry with you. You can't imagine what I'd have given to be first to your rescue. It's just my cross-grained luck that another man should stumble—”

Having affixed the last pin in the bandage, and being the other man referred to, Gilson did not hesitate to stumble again—this time into their rather intimate conversation.

“Here you are, Strong. Throw one of your handy Western hobbles around this fellow's ankles, won't you?”

Was there just a flash of amusement in the girl's tawny eyes? He could not be as sure of that as of the poor grace with which the handsome cow-man went about the dictated task.

That finished, the three stood together looking down at the tramps. The chunky one—called Jazz for short—seemed to be dozing off.

“Here you, scar-face, wake up!” Gilson ordered. “A cell in town is the nice bed-room I've reserved for you to-night, and you've not reached it yet. I'll be taking you along in a minute.”

“*You'll* be taking them?” Strong frowned

over the question and another which followed. "Where did you get that bright idea?"

"Old Hercules out in the yard has been used as a patrol-wagon in this county before, and the Government won't mind its serving these unworthies. We'll all sleep sounder knowing they're duly locked up."

Gloriana glanced anxiously from the old friend to the new.

"I shouldn't think of troubling you any further," she said to Gilson in a voice of oil.

His lean shoulders shrugged as they had before when voicing the same platitude. "Don't mention it, Miss Young Lady. A pleasure, I assure you."

"In a matter of such importance, Glory, you'll surely turn to your older friends." Strong put the interruption as a vehement statement of fact, rather than an urge. "Even though I did arrive late in the *mêlée*, let me take the prisoners into the Ear for you and act as your sponsor. Of course, you'll need to testify when they come to trial, but I can save you much annoyance, including that of being indebted to an outsider."

"I'm already deep in Mr. Gilson's debt, Phil," reminded Gloriana. But the smile she sent the surveyor was not as direct as usual.

It was apparent that she had about reached her limit of endurance. Gilson, noting this, sought to end the controversy, if a matter which was already settled as far as he was concerned could be so called.

"They are my prisoners, and I'll take them in," he said pleasantly enough, but decisively.

"Are all prisoners yours?"

A wave of white appeared about Strong's lips. No flag of truce did it look to her who knew him; rather a signal of danger.

"All those I take, yes." Gilson turned to Alonzo, and aroused him from what looked to be one of his end-of-the-world reveries. "Wish you'd go out and give the truck the once-over, Lon. I want you to body-guard the ranch to-night. Oh, not that there'll be any more trouble; but just to give the women a feeling of security."

As the old geologist departed, he stepped across the room to Gloriana, who had sunk into a chair.

"And for you, pluckiest of your sex, a night and day of absolute rest, if you'll permit me to prescribe."

The white wave about Strong's mouth had spread until it met the downward rush of red from his eyes. He thrust himself close to the man who,



on their second meeting, as on their first, had combated him.

"Who are you to be giving orders around Blaze Ranch?" he demanded. "Be careful, or I really shall have to put you in your place. I will be responsible for Miss Frazer's protection and the delivery of these thugs who attacked her to the proper authorities. If you don't think I'm able—"

The threat was none the less potent because unworded.

From Phil, Gloriana turned again to Gilson. The look of him interested her above her nervousness. Whom was it among her past acquaintances—friend or foe—that he resembled? Since that day at the Lost-and-Found his likeness to some one had haunted her. Now, as the cowlick above his forehead bristled with contrariety, as his jaw set and his strange, bluish eyes held straight upon the coercive dark ones of her admirer, their meaning no longer concealed by that veil which, from the first, had excited her curiosity as to what lay behind—

But she'd have to choose a better time to think it out. This was not an occasion for retrospect. Something more important than Seth Gilson's looks hung upon her decision.

"There's no use talking about it," he was saying with an air of finality. "I am going to have my way!"

The girl knew the Strong temper and she, at least, had seen its sign. In another second the cook-shack would stage a third battle. With a sharp cry she sprang up and hurried between them, just as her hot-head neighbor drew back for an opening blow.

"Maybe you'd best let us have it out," objected Gilson in a voice that frightened her still more.

"No—no!" She threw out both hands to widen the space between them. "You both ought to think of me a little bit. I've had all the fighting I can stand to-night. I'll decide, if I may, in my own house."

She appealed directly to Strong.

"Mr. Gilson has a right to take them if he wants to, just as he had the other day," she declared, although with apprehension in eyes and voice. "You were so generous in acknowledging yourself wrong then—won't you agree with me to-night?"

But he drew up and looked as if he hated also her.

"So you approve him—against me—*again?*" he asked coldly and distinctly.

"Oh, not him against you, Phil! What a

foolish way to put it. It's just a question of fairness; the side issue of whether he or you— Why, Phil, I should think you'd be *glad* to have Mr. Gilson take them, so that you and I—" She caught his hand where it hung loosely at his side. "You can stay a while and talk to me—can tell me what you have concluded about that—"

She stopped.

His hand had dropped like a stone from hers.

He had started to the door, but now faced about half-way.

"Since you always approve him in public, I'll give you a chance to do so in private. The other little side issue between us is evidently of small importance. It can wait. As for *you*—"

With a white heat of vehemence that made it seem advisable for him to carry out his threat of immediate departure, he faced Gilson.

"You'll have to say what you like to the girl I'm going to marry after I've gone, for I won't mess you up before her. She's too keen not to see through your snake-grass wriggles soon. I'll risk you or any other man turning her against me, for I've got my own way of winning a woman, which does not consist in bullying everybody within sight just to show my strength. But don't you spoil the landscape around here again. *If you do—*"

Strong never finished the sentence, although his lips moved several times in an effort to do so.

As though dreading the thought of what he might do more than either the interloper's victory or the girl's change of heart, he whirled about and hurried out the door.

## CHAPTER XVII

### WITHOUT DAN DUNN

As the day wore along, each minute stretched out of all resemblance to the minutes of other days.

Gloriana Frazer was not used to idleness. She moved about the living-room, constitutionally unable to benefit from the prescription of a day's absolute rest, ordered by "Dr." Gilson, as counter-action for the effects of such an experience as had been hers.

Although the thick walls of the old-fashioned ranch-house lent toward coolness and the windows were shuttered against the outside glare, she found it impossible to "recline" on the couch, as the fine ladies the surveyor expected her to emulate probably would have done. She could not even sit for any length of time. "Absolute rest" for her—Gloriana? Why, her own dad would not have recognized her in such servitude!

In every detail she had reviewed the melodrama

which at moments had seemed verging into tragedy, staged last evening in the cook-shack. If, indeed, she was in a "state of nerves," she told herself at her conclusion, it was due, not so much to the personal maltreatment she had suffered, as to that after-clash between the two men whom she had hoped to reconcile. Diagnosing her symptoms further, she realized that continuing fear was what had made her so restless all day long. But was the fear for the break in her heart-affair with Philip or for possible results from the night's last outbreak of hostilities?

Although Phil's unreasonable rage had made him deaf to her entreaty, it was, in a way, a tribute to her—it was jealousy, the strength as well as weakness of his devotion. Was he sorry by now—Philip? If his heart and head ran true to past performance, he would be asking her forgiveness soon.

Yet she knew him too well to hope that he would so quickly relent toward the stranger with whom, at both meetings, he had instinctively clashed. Suppose the two should happen upon each other to-day in Rabbit Ear? What might not occur away from her presence—without the restraint of being beneath her roof-tree?

Keener grew her regret that she had not



avoided the second triumph of Gilson over her handsome suitor by insisting that the prisoners be locked up for the night in the empty root-house. She could just as well have turned them over to Sheriff Sobey herself. Then she would not have needed to choose between their would-be custodians, the smoldering antipathy between the two need not have flared into that open disagreement.

Why hadn't she gone along in the detested truck in which the incorrigible sign-post man had arrived to make his social "call"? Or, better still, why hadn't she ridden after him that morning? Her woman's wit might have shunted unpleasant consequences from the quite possible meeting of the young men in town, might also have helped in bringing the outrage home to Timothy Rudd, whom she believed responsible.

In the complications of last night everybody, it seemed to her, had been too easy on the arch villain in letting him go with nothing less than a warning—and simply because the horses left by the thugs in the aspens had not worn his brand. Why hadn't she thought all this out in time? But it was too late now. Everything, dire or otherwise, that was due to happen, had happened!

In her decision regarding the escort of the prisoners, she had not been supported even by her

own lieutenant. An echo of Mena's comment returned, further to torment her:

"You're one lulu of an old man to pass the deal to that there spatted pilgrim, as ain't connected in no way to your outfit. If you can't throw your hackamores yourself, you might-a remembered that you're paying wages to a forewoman. Of all the ring-tailed pieces of hell-singed foolishment I ever— Beg your pardon, deary, but—"

"Don't mind me," Gloriana had interrupted. "Cuss as hard as you like. At least, it makes you *sound* terrible."

Her only defense against the fusillade of plain-speaking which ensued was that Mena must have reasons of her own, unrelated to the interests of her employer, for wishing to visit Rabbit Ear.

"Well, it ain't nothing so dod-twisted again' me as a lone female if my heart *is* true to one man, instead of two or more," the ex-coquette had contributed shamelessly and rather pointedly.

Gloriana was alone at the ranch-house with nothing to do but think, a trying predicament for one given to action. If she could have ridden to Dan Dunn and thought out loud, how much easier the painful process would have been! It gave her confidence, however, to remember that Daniel usually agreed with her conclusions—or,

at least, kept objection to his sandstone self. He was, really, as satisfactory an adviser as a girl could ask.

Alone with her thoughts—what a day!

Mena had done penance for her outburst by riding forth earlier than usual on her morning inspection of the horse bands. Later, Mary Ellen O'Grady had removed the headache towel from her forehead and small biscuit of hair—a suggestive, if not beautifying reminder of her share in the recent fracas—and had presented herself somewhat shamefacedly.

Her nerves were plumb frazzled, she had said. She felt that she needed a little fresh air, a little bit of exercise, a little change of scene. Besides which, she was worried over the state of health of that "convict"—of T. Weed Gay. She feared he would not last long in Blaze Ranch service if he continued to mistreat his "innards" with fry-pan bread and other output of his own cooking—or in-put, to be exact.

It seemed that she had prepared some few real victuals and that Mr. Funk, who was amenable to women's wiles, even if a bit hardened as to the fate of the world—which you couldn't exactly blame the poor old skate for, him being a geologist—had consented to hitch up the buckboard

and drive her over to Looking Glass. That is, if their Glory-girl was sure she'd be able to nap it off in their absence.

Gloriana, although inwardly sure, quite sure, that she couldn't "nap it off," agreed that Mary Ellen looked "kind of peaked"—a feat of the imagination, even with eyes turned away from the good spinster's spherical, glowing cheeks. If they would bring in an armful of the cactus flowers blooming so brilliantly in the yard, she would amuse herself arranging them about the room.

Were both the sister inmates of her household pretending zeal in her service to forward their own love affairs, she now asked herself, as she made her thirtieth tour of the room?

There was Mena and her longing once again to gaze upon the gangly form and morose face of her Eddie Bristo—to learn how he was "making out." And here was Mary Ellen, trusting herself to the all-too-frail seat of the buckboard in order to flaunt one who would look like a rival in the saturnine visage of her man not yet supered—that supreme male, the irresponsibility of whose next move had named him after the region's most mobile growth. She could sympathize with the degeneration of her cook lady's fatty heart, since

Tumble Weed might at any hour roll away again.

Yet, absorbing to themselves though they were, how simple the heart issues of these other women compared to her own! A sort of confusion, a great uncertainty and dread, clutched her whenever her thoughts returned, as they continually did, to the considerable problem of Philip Strong. She must get that solved—and soon. She was tired worrying about him.

Inconceivable as it seemed, every sense, every hope in her was straining to hear the horn of a motor-truck. She did wish Seth Gilson would come! At formation of the thought she saw him in fancy as he had pulled himself up the night before and insisted on having his way.

This was as good a time as ever she would have to turn back the pages of her life's photograph album, to try to determine just whom it was he resembled, that she should feel she knew him so well. She sat down to the task, gripped the arms of her chair, closed her eyes, began the limited inspection of every familiar face in her past.

Discouragement increased as she reached the imaginary album's last insert. Into a sort of dream she lapsed, in which the smiles and frowns of varied friends and enemies wavered before her

reconsideration. But all she discarded as not answering her search.

Once again she gave it up, forced her thoughts back to more practical puzzles—to her ranch work, the care of her stock, the ultimate disposal to the government of the unsurpassed Frazer reds and those hybrids which had been her own particular—

Suddenly she sprang to her feet; opened wide her eyes; gazed delightedly around on the varied objects of the room which had failed to help her. At last she had it—she *had* it—that resemblance to something familiar in the sign-post man!

He was a mule—that's what he was! The stubbornness of his cowlick, the inflexible set of his jaw, the line of his mouth, so given to amusement and whimsicality, the habitual evasiveness of eyes which could, on occasions, focus as directly and forcefully as any man's.

She had seen those eyes glare in battle; what lay behind them in peace? She'd like to know—she really should.

And she would know, too. Managing him would be easy now. Mules were the sweetest tempered, most tractable animals in the world when understood, as she ought to realize. Although their ways were often irritating; although



patience was required to coax them from memory of other people's past mistreatment; although affection and confidence must be shown them to awaken the return— Well, she knew them. She guessed she did!

From that moment of revelation until Seth Gilson's return, the time sped for Gloriana. She dusted the living-room, punched up the pillows, opened one of the magazines on the table at a color-print of an actress with dimples, curls, and a red rose in her hair. The vagrant regret that the Arizona heat forbade the supereffect of a fire in the grate brought her a vivid inspiration. The *bisnaga* blooms of crimson, orange, and yellow, which Mary Ellen had gathered at her request, she arranged on the hearth, with their bowl and most of their green concealed. Very like a fire they looked, brightening the room with color and perfume, sans the heat of winter reality.

She studied her decorative triumph from the center of the room and from one, then the other of the ingle-seats. The satisfaction faded from her face, however, as she chanced to look up at herself in the over-mantel mirror. For a second or two she frowned into the reflection; but soon again she smiled.

"Only a mule, after all!" she told herself, with a *moué* of humor and promise.

Busily she began removing the pins and undoing the utility braids of her luxuriant hair. After shaking it out, she twisted it into a deft, advantageous knot at the base of her sunburned neck. But she did not seem satisfied. She glanced at the picture in the opened magazine, then down at the blaze in the hearth.

"I hate like the dickens to stoop to such a thing, and yet—"

Her mind made up, she snipped off the yellowest of the cactus flowers and tucked it into her hair, where it showed effectively from just behind her ear.

The downward glance had reminded her of the riding trousers and boots she wore in readiness for possible action of the day—truly incongruous attire for a would-be mule-man tamer with a flower in her hair.

"Might as well ride to trail's end!" she apologized to the severe-looking furniture, before hurrying into her small bedchamber and closing the door.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### MULES AND OTHERWISE

WHEN Seth Gilson, his several honks ungreeted outside, strode into the living-room, it was to enjoy a sudden and complete change of emotion.

The anxiety which had caught him on seeing no sign of human life about the ranch-house changed into delight over a lovely and all-sufficient picture—a glory of a girl glancing up, languid-eyed, from a book in which evidently she had been too absorbed to hear him, lolling among the cushions of an ingle-seat before a fire of flowers, dressed—

Of course, he could not know that the flimsy white creation she wore was her one “frock,” donned for only the greatest of occasions. And that did not matter, anyhow.

He caught his breath at the alluring smile with which her dreamy attention on the story she had been reading was lifted to him. He did not notice

that the book was held upside down, due to the fact that she had been practising that very smile before the mirror up to the last toot of his horn—her far-West conception of a back-East siren's smile. These things wouldn't have mattered, either. Nothing could have spoiled the picture for him. Nothing ever did.

He took the opposite ingle-seat, as advised by her queenly gesture, inhaled deeply of the *bisnaga* scent, drew out and unfolded a slip of paper from his pocket.

"This is a receipt for my—for our prisoners," he announced. "Shall I read it to you?"

Without permission, he forthwith did.

"Received of Seth Gilson, Esq., two white men, alleged Jazz Jones and Spider Smith, wanted for Panamint Mountain murder. Same to be held for extradition by the Governor of the State of California.

"ROBERT SOBEY, Sheriff."

Seconds before he reached the signature his lovely lady *vis-à-vis* had forgotten to be languid.

"But the assault—and Rudd and—and last night?" she demanded. "Why are my tramps held for a California crime, when—"

"Our real purpose is to get them all the punishment the law allows, isn't it?" Gilson interrupted.

"Particularly do we wish to make out a case against their employer. That is going to take a little time. Before I got through telling the sheriff the facts last night, a lawyer appeared at the jail to consult with them. As they could not have sent for him, to my personal and positive knowledge, this gave evidence that *some one* was sufficiently interested to put up a fight for them.

"Now look at the case from this angle," he urged, seeing that her puzzled look endured. "Although their attack upon you was outrageous, it is no graver a crime in the eyes of the law than felonious assault—aailable offense under the statutes. This morning the lawyer who had come to them without being called and adopted them as clients—a shyster named Patterson, according to the sheriff—was around demanding that they be arraigned at once and bail fixed. He said he was ready to furnish any amount of bonds. He got the surprise of his life when he found that the sheriff officially knew nothing of an assault charge, but was expecting any minute to receive a telegram of congratulation from the sheriff of Inyo County, Cal."

Gloriana gave up the attempt to conceal her disappointment. "Then they're not going to be punished for what they did out here?"

"Don't you see that if we'd charged them with only that they'd have been free on bail by now and ready to jump the country at the first opportunity? After all, there's small satisfaction in hanging the same man twice—if the first ceremony has been conducted properly."

"You don't mean that they're honest-to-goodness murderers? How do you know?"

Seth Gilson looked pleased with himself.

"They're not honest or good or anything else of that sort. I think I told you, didn't I, that before tackling the Solemncholy Alonzo and I had been busy over in Death Valley? As you may not know, that cheerful little vale—also *not*—lies in Inyo County, between Telescope and Panamint Mountains. While we were there a murder occurred or took place or however you would express it—a particularly brutal one of a tourist, which soon came to be referred to by the name of the Panamint peak. The two men who were suspected of having committed the crime escaped and were then indicted, a cart-before-the-horse proceeding that is not unusual.

"I thought I recognized the choice pair last night when I was working over the Spider's wound. While you folks were out examining those horse brands, I put a question or two that seemed to



confuse them and determined me to take them in myself. And what do you think? On the wall of the sheriff's office, in Rabbit Ear, I found their highly decorative photographs posted, together with detailed descriptions and a reward offer that's worth a whole lot more than they are. There's no doubt left of their identity, so don't worry about their getting sufficient punishment."

"You seem to have a catching knack—at criminals."

"Even as the Solemncholy seems to have—at baiting them." He nodded briskly. "At that, I'm looking for more than I've caught."

"And how do you suppose," she asked in a considering way, "Tim Rudd came to hook those eels?"

"I've not given up hope that either Spider or Jazz will give some wriggle which will uncover that particular little mystery. There's none at all about why they were willing to hire out for dirty work—the Panamint murder was not a financial success, as the tourist had left his money-belt in the hotel safe before starting out. The two were hunted and desperately in need of funds."

There sounded a distinct note of complaint in the girl's tones as she asked: "Then I must wait for a showdown with Rudd?"

"Oh, I didn't forget to give the horse-trader another jolt. Unless he's a more abandoned idiot than he looks, he'll forget he ever thought of taking over Blaze Ranch stock. Just as soon as I had the thugs fastened tight, I went on a still hunt for him. Found him consulting a lawyer—not the same legal boomerang that shot to the jail and back, but a less violent-looking counselor named Harris. I believe Sobey addressed him as 'Judge.' "

"Former Judge John Harris!" exclaimed Gloriana. "I'm surprised—we've always considered him a friend of the family, although he isn't dad's lawyer."

"For all I know you may still consider him so," the surveyor continued cheerfully. "Anyway, Rudd was consulting him regarding the prospect of a successful legal action to make you carry out your father's plan. When I detailed what had happened out here last night, overlooking none of the circumstantial evidence pointing Timothy's way, Judge Harris washed his hands, not only of the prospective case, but of the client as well. He promised that if Rudd made a single move against you, in or out of court, he'd forget he was a member of the bar long enough to head a posse which would rid Arizona of one woman fighter. The

trader departed mouthing pledges of good behavior. All of which your humble servant has the honor to report."

Her next low-voiced plaint and his reception of it reminded her of her revelation regarding him.

"It may turn out O. K.—may be the way you'd do it in the East. But it isn't exactly—"

"I'm very sorry you're disappointed in me, Miss Frazer."

From having looked cheerfully expectant of her praise, all expression retired from the forefront of his eyes and his jaw set. Taking out the "makings," he began to roll a cigarette.

Regretting her slump in tactics, she watched him. Surprise caught her. He had said he was from Washington, a town which, according to the map, was located in the District of Columbia; yet he was rolling his smoke cow-puncher style, with two fingers of the same hand! If only he weren't—

She compelled her eyes away from the anomaly. She must forget what he wasn't and remember only what he was. She was not playing up to her preconception of their parts at all. One petted mules, praised them, coaxed them—never scolded or blamed.

"As I was about to say, it isn't exactly what

I'd have expected of an Easterner." For good measure she threw in one of the admiring, sirenish glances she had perfected at such pains. "It is so much deeper than anything I should have thought out. And it was just plumb smart of you to recognize those two cutthroats. You have been so competent and so kind that I—"

So long and soulful was the pause in which she looked and seemed to hesitate; looked away, frowned, looked back, then hesitated again, that he inserted a puzzled query:

"You what, Miss Young Lady?"

She leaned one elbow on her knees, cupped her chin in her hand and gazed up at him.

"That I'm going to thank you by asking something else of you, by trusting you with a confidence which I'd hesitate to share if you were *not* so kind and competent. Oh, I know you squared up our account last night! But you're so generous you won't mind starting a new one, will you, with the debit reversed?"

Gilson looked down rather quizzically into the almost worshipful expression she was lifting. Even in his encouragement he seemed reserved, wary.

"After such a preface I swear to feel honored by any confidence you may impose in me."

The moment had come.

She must guard her manner and choose her words, she adjured herself. She must not fail to look attractive one minute of the while she talked. Heroines who were any good at all *never* failed. They wouldn't be heroines if they did.

"It is in no affair of my own that I need your help, but in that of a friend—a valued friend."

Supported by no sign from her audience either of sympathy or disapproval, she told her tale of two lonely children on neighboring Arizona ranches; of that feud between a modern *Montague* and *Capulet*; of the motherless upbringing of the hotheaded son in the case; of how his life and ambition had been "close-herded" by a parent's selfishness. She touched upon the natural ability of Philip Strong, Jr. She recited several courageous deeds by which he had won the approval of the neighborhood. She reminded her attentive listener of the truly admirable self-control which he himself had witnessed when Phil had refrained from shooting him down that day of their misunderstanding on the desert's edge.

After these several approaches, now halting, now hurried, but always circuitous, she pointed the fact that Philip was deserving of the confidence of the outside world. She did think such a young

man should have a chance at other, more independent work.

Didn't Mr. Gilson think so himself?

She admitted quite prettily that, although her acquaintance with him had been so brief, she had come to place considerable reliance on his judgment. Of one thing she felt sure, at any rate; that a man of Mr. Gilson's broad-gauge type would hold no prejudice against one who, all too unwittingly, twice had forced him into the position of an enemy.

"Oh, I shouldn't say I'm in the position of enemy to your valued friend—that is, not yet," objected the expert, his odd eyes studying her and the argument. "But I think I ought to tell you before you go much farther, that I don't feel like attempting anything terribly hard for *Romeo's* sake."

"You—you—" She drew a quick breath, then smiled up at him with regardless naïveté. "How about for my sake, then?"

"You, fair *Juliet*, are different. Only I don't see where I come into the play. There isn't any precedent for me that I recall."

"Likely Mr. Shakespeare hadn't met a person just like you up to that time."

He nodded thoughtfully at her suggestion.



"If he had he'd have written me a good part, I guess."

For a moment he sat smiling at her in that abstracted, studying way. Then: "Tell me, if you don't mind adding just one more insignificant detail to the many, do you love him?"

"Mr. Gilson, I must say—"

Gloriana got to her feet in her resentment. The yellow flash of her eyes, the crimson of her cheeks, the burnished copper of her hair outdid the color-scheme of the pseudo-fire in the grate. With the movement she doffed the part she had been trying to play as she might have doffed some tinsel-and-spangle cloak.

Without bothering to think about it, she was beautiful, vital—*real*.

All she noticed was that Seth Gilson chuckled irritatingly.

"You *must* say? No, you mustn't if you don't wish to. Why get so wrought up over the last trifling detail? Never mind the answer. I get it. You think you do, which, at your age, probably means as much as if you really did."

"Did what?"

"Love him. But you don't. You're more in love with me this minute than you'll ever be with him. Only you don't know it."

"I sure don't!"

"Anyhow," added he urbanely, "that's one point on which we're agreed. Now here's another. I, too, am sorry for your Philip, not because I love him, but because you really don't."

"*Mule!*"

For the life of her, Gloriana could no longer contain the word. Her emphasis suggested that she would not waste herself further trying to change his breed of a mind.

"So that is why you've been purring at me so nicely to-day, *tigress?*" he inquired. "Fine to have got each other's numbers, isn't it? Ought to draw us closer together, oughtn't it?"

He paced across the room, stopped before the reading-table, looked down at the magazine opened at the picture of the actor-lady with the rose in her hair, nodded again to himself, then to her.

"There is a difference in the mental caliber of mules, isn't there?" commented he. "I'm going to give you a pleasant surprise, thereby demonstrating that I'm not as unreasonable as some. I'll take another whack at the Strong temper."

"Another *whack?* You don't mean—"

"I mean that I'll do my part toward having a fatherly talk with my unfriendly enemy. If he

himself wants the kind of chance you want him to want— Well, we'll have to see."

"When, Mr. Gilson?"

Lightly as the tinsel cloak, Gloriana doffed her resentment—now that she was to have her way.

"For the next week I'll be extra busy reëstablishing my camp and getting certain experiments started. After that—"

"You're not moving away?"

He noted the anxiety in her question—probably for *Romeo*.

"No. Moving nearer. Do you mind? Settling just below the Lost-and-Found sink where you roped me in, you know—you and your other mule friends."

He paused for a comradely grin, then continued:

"I've received my next assignment—to make the Lost stay Found. It is only a question of water supply to make many thousands of Solemn-choly acres glad, and I'm to take the preliminary survey. The best thing about it all is that we'll be within hailing distance of you, Alonzo and I, in case of more trouble."

"Perhaps I won't wait for trouble to hail you," she said, with the coquetry of a girl and the frank, outstretched hand of a boy.

"Here's hoping!" said Gilson, and stooped to

press his lips against the brown, freckled member.

Embarrassed, Gloriana's gaze fixed upon the cow-lick of his down-bent head. Always a gentlemanly sort, she longed to make amends.

"They named my horse Conflagration after me," she said very softly, "and I'm right proud of the resemblance. You don't mind my calling you a— You know, I'm *mighty* fond of mule flesh."

"You win," he said, as if glad of the fact. "Just let your valued friend quiet down for these few days, then— Well, he'll see and you'll see and I— You can bet that *I'll* see!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### QUESTIONS UNANSWERED

RETURNING to the ranch from her first visit to town since the "scare party" ten days before, Gloriana Frazer's mood was equivocal. Her self-prescribed action-antidote for the wearing uncertainty of her mother's fate had been administered in full-sized doses through the needs of the short-handed outfit, but with only partial success.

At the post-office the all-wise Miss Em Walton had handed her the first word from the family envoy, after commenting, in hope of further enlightenment, upon the envelope's length, breadth, thickness, stamp, and chirography. On the whole, its contents had been disappointing.

The letter had been mailed at Ignacio and forwarded from her aunt's address in Phoenix. Blaze had reached the small Sonora hamlet sans "untoward event," so he wrote. According to directions, he had visited the *pulque* shops, asking in each for one José el Toro. As foretold, his queries had been met by blank faces; none knew

or had heard of "Joe the Bull." For three days, up to the date of "taking pen in hand," he had been waiting at a flea-infested tavern for the forthcoming of the promised "direction to *rancheria*." He proposed to wait one more day, and then, if nothing happened of itself in the furnishing line, "to start something."

This news of the snag of delay, encountered at the very start of his search, distressed the girl with the fear that she had erred in judgment in not having written to him at once that the packet which had taken him so far from home had been posted at their own Rabbit Ear. Several times and seriously had she considered entrusting such a message to the hit-miss Mexican mails, even though they had agreed before his departure that all communications should come from him to her. As she read on through to-day's letter, however, she felt more certain than before that her postponement of any discouraging word was best. Time enough for him to know if he found no Marge at the end of his present course.

"And say, don't you worry about me, Glory-girl, since I don't worry about you. It's a great comfort to know that you're snug in the home harbor with Aunt Sarah." That concluding paragraph of the painstaking missive, the penmanship



of which, she well knew, had been a harder task for him than the "throwing" of squaw-hitches, filled her with guilt. "Of course I ain't enjoying myself none, being all at sea as I am, but I'm living on hunches in hunks that we're headed for a safe landing. I sure hope that the horse tally came up to expectations, and that you're spending some few of the *yen* on yourself and friends in Phoenix."

Guilty on first reading she had felt, yes; but as she rode along, considering, she came positively to congratulate herself on the way it had worked out. Since he had peace of mind regarding her, why send him news that must distress him? There was too much to explain, anyhow, for the medium of inked words on paper. When she could tell him all about it with her eyes on his eyes and her hand in his strong clasp, then he would know that she had disregarded his decision, not from obstinacy or the will to disobey, but from love of him and pride in their name and an all-compelling sense that she was right.

Since all was now going well with her, why torment him with the unembellished details of the overthrow of those "best-laid plans" of his; with the retaliatory attempts of Tim Rudd and the malice she and her supporters had aroused by foil-

ing him? Far better would the telling be when Blaze was home again, and the game—their double game, she hoped—was won! If his trip into Mexico proved fruitless, as she at moments of depression felt sure it would, he would need all the cheer she could administer. Moreover, he would need all the strength she could save up for discovering that agent “nearer home” who had penetrated so much farther than they into their desert tragedy.

Not only must she save her Daddy Blaze from worry, but she must deny the worry luxury to herself. The operation of the ranch and disposal of their market band needed every whit of her attention and time.

The spinster postmistress had handed her a second letter—in official envelope, this, and from the army headquarters at El Paso. It announced the coming of two remount officers to inspect and purchase such of the Frazer horses and mules as met requirements. Evidently it had been delayed in the mails, as the date was set but ten days hence.

The imminence of the inspection visit had extended her stay in town by hours, which she had utilized trying to beg, bribe, or borrow a couple of busters to see her through the crowded period.

In this she had egregiously failed, and it began to look as though the officers would have a cow-girl treat. But she refused to be dismayed by the prospect. She and Mena, with such able help as the Weed might distribute over the tasks of half a dozen men, would carry on the busting try-out—or, as Mena would have put it, “bust their gol-twisted selves.”

Once the market band of reds and her beloved hand-trained mules which, of necessity, had been neglected since her father's departure, were on their way to service, she would be over the peak with the load she voluntarily had assumed.

“Only a few days more, Con,” she leaned over to advise her second self as they breezed along, “and we'll each have time for a breath. Golly-bird, old hoss, won't they be deep ones?”

The beautiful bay snorted, as if in anticipatory assent.

“Officer men are coming to count the teeth of our charges,” she continued, enjoying the out-loud sound of her self-assurances. “They'll say; ‘Miss Glory Frazer, ma'am, why can't ordinary folks raise grade horses as fine as these?’ And then they'll see you, Connie. Then their mouths *will* water and they'll want to burn U. S. on your hip and stamp a cavalry number on your hoof!

But we'll have to tell them you're already enlisted for life and stick to it, no matter what they offer. Don't worry—you can count on me, at least as long as I'm alive."

Then, in the very midst of her enthusiasm, she sighed. The expression "enlisted for life" had brought an unhappy memory of the chaotic darkness in which her more personal inclinations and disinclinations were struggling.

Since that party of a dozen real surprises not a word had come from her fervent but too highly strung suitor. From him she had expected penance for the culminative jealousy that last had parted them. Whether he was seeking to outlive his unreasonable anger in retirement at Emerald Ranch, or had sought surcease in a gayer atmosphere down in Tucson, where he occasionally went for recreation, she had no means of knowing. And she did want to know!

Busy as was Seth Gilson, on the other hand, establishing his new camp at the ford and planting the instruments which would register the flow of the Lost-and-Found in its tributaries, he had made opportunity for several brief calls.

Once he had come to purchase saddle horses for himself and Funk, since their survey for the water-supply project must take them frequently where

Hercules could not rumble. Again he had reported his honest attempt to achieve that "fatherly talk" which he had promised. "Not at home" had been his welcome on asking for Strong, Jr. at the stucco palace, the red-tiled roof of which she could at that very moment see glowing in the sunlight far across the basin from her homeward trail.

Therefore the reclamation project which she had set herself was at a standstill, unless the young hot-blood of a beneficiary was working it out for himself. At the thought a sanguine possibility caught her attention.

Philip, at least to Gilson, was "not at home." Could it be that he really was absent; that he had left Emerald Ranch, however, not to pursue metropolitan dissipations, but to take that step toward independence which she had made conditional?

But, oh dear! She could not afford to worry or even wonder about Phil; she must not waste her concentration upon what probably would remain an unanswerable problem until he chose to show her the answer in the back of the book. There were so many more necessary things to think about. She had come positively to envy *Juliet Capulet* who had had, according to Mr. Shakespeare, only one thing preying on her mind. And,

at that, she had been driven to take a sleeping draft in order to forget her troubles. Indeed, an amazing lot was expected of modern girls!

A good thing it was that the affairs of the ranch had been running smoothly. Timothy Rudd seemed to have learned his lesson, for he had made no recent effort to force her hand. Whether his inactivity was due to the failure of his fright sortie, to the warning of Judge Harris when declining to act as his attorney, or to the fact that the geological surveyors had established their camp on the outskirts of her ranch, she neither knew nor cared; it was enough that he let her alone.

Truly grateful was she that, after her hard day in the Ear, she might push on to the peace and quiet of the home place.

Peace and quiet? On what optimistic tangent had her thoughts been wandering?

The bark of a gun, a woman's shriek, a second shot, then sustained and successive howls of mortal agony assailed her ears as she turned from the main trail into her own roadway. The sounds were anything but quieting—certainly they foretold no peace!



## CHAPTER XX

### ALWAYS BUSY REALLY IS

AT Gloriana's touch, Con sprang into top speed and carried her ahead of the wind toward a scene beyond her comprehension.

A writhing mass that bore some resemblance to a human being seemed to be wrecking Mary Ellen's cactus bed, the while issuing cries which must have aroused mercy in a stone. Yet petrified seemed the two persons looking on—Mary Ellen O'Grady herself in the attitude of a Hun watching a suffering Belgian, and Ed Bristo, whose absence from his "dry" oasis, where she had tried and failed to deliver a Mena-gram a few hours before, was now explained.

The sound of rushing hoofs other than Con's lifted Gloriana's glance toward the range, from where she saw her forewoman streaking toward the troubled scene at Flame's best speed. As the horses ran dead heats, and the distance was about equal, they must reach the yard at practically the same moment.

The last few rods, both eyes and ears enlarged her idea of the untoward happening just ahead.

"Roll, damn you—roll!" she heard Bristo bellow, and saw that he was punctuating his suggestion with a gun.

"Stick him, pins in a cushion—stick him deep!" the cook-lady demanded of her spiny flower-bed.

But who could be the victim of this novel rite?

Not until the young boss was about to leap from her saddle did she get a recognizable glimpse of the face attached to the half-clothed body upon the *bisnaga* bed. That the old Apache, Always Busy, should so utterly have forgotten the boasted stoicism of his race spoke for pain of body more than of mind.

From the saddle she landed on both feet, the same moment that Philomena alighted in equally regardless fashion from the back of Flame. Together they rushed the gunman who seemed so suddenly bereft of all "backwardness."

"Let up, Ed Bristo!" commanded Gloriana. "What's bitten you to come to my place and start a ruction like this?"

"That ain't what I came for!" stated the forewoman's suitor sullenly. "My intentions was only to patch up a peace with Mena, but what do I find?"

Self-reminded, he worked his gun-wrist out of her grip, and with it incited anew the movement which had brought the howls from his victim.

"Now, t'other way—*roll*, darn your tough hide!" he shouted.

As Gloriana started to unlimber her own persuader the forewoman intervened.

"Don't you go and get rough with Ed, deary!" she begged. "Looks like pining alone in the Oasis has drove him mad. Best leave him to me!"

Gloriana did. Shoving aside the dense barrier of the cook lady, she hurried to the spiked bed to relieve the native from his crucifixion agony. His eyes lifted in dumb gratitude as she extended a hand and helped him to his feet, which, although bare as his shirtless back, were callous to cacti pricks.

"Mustache devil and fat squaw—they kill Busy sure, if Missey Glory-Fraze not come!" he muttered as he set about removing the thorns which had preferred his leathern body to the botanical pincushion.

Some moments of insistence passed before the girl could gain from the supposedly civilized whites any comprehensible explanation of their barbaric conduct.

Mary Ellen, it seemed, had made the original

discovery—of Always Busy hidden beneath a bed in the main house. Her outcry had brought Eddie Bristo from the living-room, where he had been awaiting the return of his former dry-bar-maid. Between them they had frisked the Apache for plunder—a brief task, as he wore nothing but a pair of overalls; but without result.

“And since when did the tortures of hell become the punishment for being caught under a bed?” the girl demanded.

“You just wait!” The perforce reformed saloonist, who had quelled many a barroom riot by his coolness, fairly shook from rage through his whole lank length. “You agree, don’t you, that being the only white man in sight, I had the right to demand an explanation of his prowling? Well, what do you think that tarantula-wasp stung back at me? What do you *think*?”

“I haven’t time to think and can’t guess,” she admitted. “Must have roweled you deep.”

Bristo slanted his somber eyes toward Philomena. “It stuck me deeper, right here, mind you, than those there cactus pricks could a-done him.” He relaxed into a sigh, his hand on his heart.

“I must say,” the brunette retorted with more spirit than had been hers in their soda-pop days, “if this is a samp of the uncivilized way you’re

going to carry on when you're displeased with anything—"

"*Anything?*" He transfixed her with really awful reproach. "Woman, this is a matter of honor. Little do you dream in your innocence—It was Mena's bed we dragged him from under," he added in a sepulchral voice. "And them there words he stabbed me to the heart with was these here: 'Squaw with hair of a raven's wing—her my friend.' Mena his 'friend'? Ha! I'll show him who's his lady friend! Roll, damn—"

Turning in a fresh access of retribution toward the red offender, he found himself confronted by an equally aroused lady, fair, fat, and all of forty.

"Sure, you think it was *Mena* the critter was attracted toward just because he crawled under her bed for escape? How would he be knowing which was her bed, at all, at all? Do you think I'd take to murdering to save the good name of any other woman than myself, I'm asking you?"

Only one word issued from the avenger lately so replete with words.

"*You?*"

That was all, but the way he looked her over was a small vocabulary.

"Now what are you insinuating? Ain't there more than one squaw here present? And my hair,

although not as heavy a suite as I used to have, ain't it raven-wing? Mena and I, sure we do look something alike!"

"Say, there might be a difference of opinion as to that!"

It was the forewoman herself who had undertaken her own defense against the charge. To be referred to as "something" like one she had regarded as the most horrible example of what years and pounds would do—and before her Eddie in this triumphant hour when he had disturbed himself all the way from Rabbit Ear to Blaze to "patch peace" with her—

There being none of the male sex around who mattered to her, Mary Ellen remembered in time the generous instincts with which she, if none else, always had accredited herself; she rose superior to small vanities. "Looks and heft is all a matter of taste," she said, with a placating smile. "Lucky we've both got our reg'ler admirers, ain't it? As for this heathern aboriginee, his stomach likely appreciates the victuals I've handed him more than his mind does my looks or good heart. But if iver he tries secreting himself away again, with the Lord knows what evil intend to win me affections—"

"There, Mary Ellen, don't work yourself up



again—or you either, Eddie!” Gloriana interrupted the return of the two toward the redskin. “Likely Busy wasn’t after the affections of either of you raven-wing beauties! At any rate, he’s paid with interest—for a few minutes lived up to his name. You say you found nothing stolen on him, so maybe he’ll tell me his intentions.”

“Uhuh! Me come with no harm to Blaze squaws.”

“Of course you didn’t, Busy Bee, and you sure look as if you’d been stung a-plenty! Suppose you take Ed up on the porch, Mena. And Mary Ellen, to the cook-shack and the fatted calf for you!”

Alone with the old Apache, Gloriana’s manner changed.

“Now you tell Missey what you were doing in her house! The truth, and I’ll take you in, get the prickles out of you and feed you plumb up. A lie—you unpin yourself and get a dog to wash your wounds!”

Although with a hungry, distressed look, the Indian meandered into pigeon-English appreciations of her mercy and vague assurances that she maybe would not be sorry—some day.

She cut him short impatiently. “All right, you won’t tell. In the future, Blaze Ranch is bad

medicine for you. Keep away or I may not save you next time. Remember, once you get shot to the sandhills there is no come-back. Now hike!"

She had acted on her knowledge that nothing could be gleaned from a sullen buck. After watching him limp out of the yard toward the open trail she entered the house by the back door. Half-way into the living-room she stopped short, realizing that she had stepped in where the head-boss of all the archangels would have feared to tread—upon the crucial scene of two lives.

Into its grateful privacy her forewoman and the bachelor so "out of the habit" of proposing had retreated from the porch. Although a most unintentional eavesdropper, Gloriana saw and heard several things before she could depart the room.

No doubt could there be of the passion with which the lanky gallant was pawing his lady's competent hands or the desperate anxiety of his voice.

"Say you ain't lost to me—slip me that one comfort!" he implored. "My life is a barren waste without you—the Oasis all littered up. My name, my heart, my diamond stud are at your disposal. I'll be glad to ride back to the Ear without it—although it ain't been off my person since

the last payment six years ago—proud to acknowledge what fair mitt snatched it from off my palpitating shirt-bosom at last!"

Nor could the nobility of Philomena's response have been improved upon:

"It will take more than jewels—even a *genuine* diamond like what is this minute sparkling over them palpitations you mention, Eddie Bristo, to rope me into the yoke of matrimony. I ain't stuck on no career of redding up•no littered Oasis, I tell you straight!"

It was just at this point, when she was toying so high-handedly with a *bona-fide* proposal, that she became aware of her employer's presence. Nothing daunted, however, she continued in lifted tones:

"You might as well know beforehand that you'd have to rent a real slave to pop the soda bottles, whilst I arise to my exalted, rightful sphere. Not for naught wouldst I give up the freedom of my present state. Only for unremitting love and devotion does a *fore*-woman get behind a man. None but a husband on his knees wouldst I consider—*on his knees*, say I!"

Even before Gloriana's escape the regal gesture which embellished these stern terms had bent the gangly, somewhat stiff form of the confirmed

bachelor—had landed him literally in the dictated prostrate position.

That he was subsequently raised to a normal state of body, if not of mind, became evident some minutes later, when the young boss saw the twain starting out for their first stroll as an engaged unit.

The living-room vacated, Gloriana reentered to open her desk and file the letters which she had brought from town. The while her mind forsook the Mena-Eddie demonstration of the survival of the fittest for the unanswered problem of the old Apache and his possible object of concealment in her house. She was trying to convince herself that he had taken an ungovernable fancy to some trifle in her possession and had only petty larceny intentions, when she opened a lower drawer to place her father's letter with the unused power of attorney and other of her treasures.

From a hasty examination of its contents she started back with a smothered cry. The all-precious packet of Mother-Marge tokens, placed therein only recently, with their accompanying pencil-point instructions—all were gone. So they were what the Apache had come to steal!

## CHAPTER XXI

### A CLEAN SWEEP

A "JAW ON FOUR PAWS," prowling in from the desert, had been troubling the two-year-olds, according to Philomena's report. This accounted for Gloriana Frazer's appearance in the yard as the sun was coming out of the east. Before noon, if the "sign" had not been blotted out, she expected the mountain lion family to number less by one.

She was adjusting her repeating rifle into a décolleté scabbard on Conflagration's saddle when an Indian boy loped up, astride the bare back of a peaked-looking pony. Recognizing Never Full, nephew of old Always Busy, she waved a greeting.

"From White Man Scalp Himself," said the youth. Slipping to the turf beside her, he produced from somewhere about his scanty apparel a bit of folded paper which he presented with a flourish.

Acquainted with the name which the awed Apaches had conferred upon Tumble Weed Gay because of his all-too-removable wig, Gloriana

seized the missive with apprehension. That the ranger should find it necessary to communicate with her by native messenger was so unusual as to hint at trouble. From past experience with Gay's communications, she glanced at his inevitable postscript first and was able to laugh her relief.

Never Full's relationship to her latest problem returned the girl's attention to the messenger.

"Where can I find that plumb worthless old uncle of yours, Never?" she asked with a smile to blunt the sting of her adjectives.

"Who knows?" returned the boy. "Maybe so he gone by town. Maybe again he start on his far journeys thataway." He gestured toward the saw-toothed range which fringed the desert on the west.

"Just where does Always live, Never?"

"Nowhere." The statement was put with a vacuous grin. "Busy always make the visits; we never visit him."

Gloriana let the matter drop. She had not time to comb the native settlements for the wickiup of this shifty buck whose own relatives did not know his whereabouts, much as she wished to squeeze him through a question-colander as to his interest in the little pard's priceless bracelet and veil.



With the discovery, after a thorough search, that the old Indian had left his ragged coat under Philomena's bed when the angry suitor dragged him forth, had come restoration of the tokens. They were found stuffed in one of the pockets of the garment, evidently discarded that its owner might not be caught "with the goods," and now reposed in a more secret hiding-place. But the question stood open: What was the Apache's interest that he should have searched for and be departing with them when the unexpected appearance of Ed Bristo had sent him into ill-chosen concealment? In some way he must be made to answer.

"When you see him, tell him to call for his coat," she said to the boy; then, by way of reward for his messenger service, added: "Vamoose to the culinary kingdom, Never Full, and make signs to Queen Mary Ellen O'Grady regarding the capacity of your boa-constrictor appetite."

The boy looked so dazed by her linguistic flight that she was moved to translate:

"Heap big eats—fat squaw make 'em!"

The prospect grasped, Never Full lost no time in improving her suggestion.

The girl returned to a complete perusal of her note:

## RESPECTED OLD MAN :

I am in receipt of authenticated word that all ain't going well in the cook-shack. I never thought as how I'd be obliged to serve notice on you, Miss Glory, but it has come to this: If you can't look after my interests in the kitchen, I won't no longer take care of your'n up here. I'll tumble my way off'n the ranch *pronto* if conditions ain't changed. Living alongside a looking-glass keeps me reminded that I'm some old geezer yet, and I want my rights protected.

Awaiting your early and favorable reply, I remain, on guard, respectfully,

T. WEED GAY, Esq.

P. S.—That *hombre* Funk may have his own hair, but it ain't silvery like the moon, as some she-women say. There being a full moon last night, I looked. It ain't like no such thing. You'd ought to warn him off from Blaze or hire him into the outfit in place of yours truly—T. W. G., Esq.

P. S. again—I can forgive Miss O'Grady for calling me convict, jail bird, *et al*, but not that there silver-mooning of the aforementioned horse-thief, unless she'll sign up to cook always for, sincerely yours—W. G.

When she considered the labor this appeal must have cost the goaded lover, Gloriana felt moved to act upon it. Going to the cook-shack, she interrupted the impossible as regards young Never Full by handing Mary Ellen the note.

“'Tis queer critters menfolks be!” mused that

good lady after reading, with a gusty sigh. "Their fences is always down on what they ain't got. Sure, the minute I seen Alonzo's silver-moon thatch, didn't I know it would tumble the Weed, Lord love him?"

"I'll be riding that way to-day," offered Gloriana. "Shall I tell him—"

"Tell him the man what I cook for always must have black hair that won't never silver. And likely you'd best add that questions are best answered direct by them most concerned."

As Gloriana rode away her frown was for the return thought of how simple were the heart solutions of others compared to her own. According to the word-of-mouth message she was carrying, Mary Ellen had solved hers by the introduction of a potential rival *with* hair. Soon she would possess the adored one who was without. And yesterday Philomena, rough-shod, had goaded to the fore the backward suitor at last reduced to asking terms. As for herself—

The spring called Looking Glass, from the mirrorlike sheen of its placid surface, was in a *coulée* at the foot of the *mesa* where the market band was pastured. A small, green park sur-

rounded it, among the cottonwoods of which stood the makeshift cabin which sheltered T. Weed Gay, of the diminishing epistolary superscriptions, as it had many a circle-rider before him.

His horse, grazing unhoppled nearby, whinnied a greeting, at the same time announcing by his presence that the master was at home. Probably the Weed was still asleep after his night-long ride, the girl opined. Even so, from the nature of the message she brought, she would not hesitate to awaken him. Hers ought to be the most welcome alarm of his topsy-turvy life, and she was more than willing to sound it, trusting to later persuasion that the two would listen to reason and postpone their wedding trip until the ranch could spare them.

An uncanny, gurgling sound was the only answer to the sharp rap of her quirt-handle upon the door. When both in turn were repeated she pushed her way in, then stopped. Tumble Weed indeed lay in his bunk, but he was "scalped," tied hand and foot and rendered speechless by a gag in his mouth!

As the girl hurried toward him, past the deal-table upon which a half-eaten supper was spread, she wondered at the lack of disorder in the room.

The old ranger must have been taken entirely by surprise, with no chance for the fight-back which she knew to be in him.

She needed but a moment to sever the ropes and ease the silencer from between his jaws. That at first he could not articulate argued that the gag had been some time in place. The sounds which issued from his mouth complained like those of a yearling babe. As a student of sign-language, however, Gloriana could not fail to interpret the frantic motions which the victim of this second Blaze Ranch outrage was making toward his bald pate. Always on first awakening, Tumble Weed restored his wig to the scalp upon which it did not grow. Now he could not find it.

She joined in the search. When she at last espied it nailed to the back of the door which she had thrown open on entering, alarm clutched her, in lieu of the healthy indignation over her employée's plight which had been her first feeling. She pried loose the false thatch, tossed it to him and poured him a glass of water from the bucket beside the stove. The refreshment served to lubricate his tongue sufficiently for intelligible utterance.

That the same fear had come to both was made apparent from his first question.

"The reds—they all right?"

"I don't know. Came direct from the home-ranch and haven't been on the *mesa*. However they are, there is time to hear how you came a hell-bending cropper like this."

"*Quien sabe?*" asked the old man with the shrug that usually accompanies that expressive colloquialism of the Southwest.

"Well, you'd better make a hustle and find out, then!" she adjured him. "If you were a hooch-hound, I'd think—"

His hurt look protested that, as she well knew, he had not touched a drop for years.

"I sloped yesterday afternoon over to the Apache camp with a communication I wished delivered to you," Tumble Weed continued in more normal speech. "Came home at sundown to grab a bite before going out to ride herd as per usual. Remember warming a mess of beans and bringing the coffee pot to another boil and setting down at the table and drinking a cup of the stuff, as didn't taste just right, and— Well, that's about all I do remember."

Gloriana reached for the coffee pot and opened the lid. The cold liquid which half-filled it threw off an odor unrecognizable at the moment, certainly not one that should have come



from the bean, even in these days of adulteration.

"Some kind *amigo* slipped a drug into the pot while you were billy-dooing, looks like," was her verdict. "Later he came back and put you out of the running proper. I'll bet we find the *mesa* as horseless as a Detroit factory. Come along and saddle up. Let's know the worst and make the best of it."

"Characteristically Frazer," might have been Tumble Weed's comment had his wit risen above his chagrin.

Without waiting for him, Gloriana flung out the door and into the saddle. Before he had tugged on his boots he could hear Con galloping up the bluff trail that led to the broad tableland on which the most advanced band of Blaze horses pastured.

The girl dared not think as she urged her mount to the scramble. Too much was involved in this thunder-clap issue to debilitate herself by dread. One look would decide and that need not long be postponed.

With a last bound the horse gained the top, and she helped herself to that look. So far as concerned any exclamation passing her lips, her eyes might have been feasting upon the finest aggregation of thoroughbreds in the State. In truth, they

saw not a single horse; nothing but waving red-top, relieved here and there with white sage—absolutely nothing, from the barbed boundary on the west to the rocky bulwark which nature had thrown up against desert-encroachment on the east.

## CHAPTER XXII

### HER DESPERATE BENT

"CLEANED out!"

This was all she said when Gay joined her, no later than it had taken him to saddle and follow.

Unable to offer comfort, at loss for an excuse, the old ranger caught napping for the first time in his long and varied life hung his head in shame.

After her mind had raced through the possibilities of averting the disaster, she saw and pitied and turned to him.

"Cheer up, T. Weed!" Gloriana forced a confident note into her voice that surprised even herself. "We're not licked yet! A couple of hundred grade-horses don't leave a pussy-foot trail. Brush the rest of that dope out of your eyes and take an earful of instructions!"

It was a "cinch," she argued, that the drive had been to the desert, whether made by rustlers who hoped to reach the border and cross into Mexico or by her implacable enemy from the Ear, who, as a dastardly, culminating prod, would scatter the band over the Solemncholy.

She would ride at once across the *mesa* and pick up the trail at point of outgo. This found, she would follow at Con's best speed. Thank Heaven—rather the mountain lion—she had her own tried-and-trusted rifle aboard!

"But grub, Miss Glory—and water?" protested Tumble Weed. "You're forgetting of the desert and its hellish thirst. Come back to the cabin and stock up."

"I'll get what I can carry from the surveyor's camp at the Lost-and-Found," she declared. "You'll want all you have for the follow-up party you're going to bring. Breeze over to the Apache village and tell the bucks there what's up. They'll tear their shirts to get in on a chase like this. Pick out the best and youngest of the bunch and come a-running after me. Tell the Indians that there's a horse for each in it, whether we win or not. I'll count on your catching up by the time I need reënforcement."

"But what trail?"

Certainly Tumble Weed's brain was not yet clear or he wouldn't have wasted time on such questions.

"Pick it up, as I mean to do. If your eyes stay gummed the Apaches will look sharp for you. At that, if you can't follow the sign of a band the

size of ours, you'd better settle down to washing Mary Ellen's dishes for life. Which reminds me—"

She was not thinking of the message she had come that way to deliver, but of the necessity of getting word to the home-ranch and instructions to Philomena for the protection of the younger stock which was left. She scratched a brief note and handed it to the ranger.

"Send one of the 'Pache boys to Mary Ellen with this—which tells the whole story."

"It don't knock me too hard, does it, Miss Glory?" he asked pitifully.

She relented thus far: "I couldn't knock you with my cook-lady, Weed, if I wanted to. She accepts your proposal, circumlocute though it was. You belong to her now, and Mary Ellen sure stands up for her own. But, for the good Lord's sake and my reputation, prove yourself worthy of her to-day! Let's go."

She found the broad trail where it led through a defile so rocky that never had it been considered necessary to throw wire across. This was the natural point of egress for drivers who did not dare go around, but were in a hurry to reach the desert. She followed through, picking up the trail again as it entered the sands, and crossed

what would have been the course of the Lost-and-Found, had the evasive stream not chosen to run underground at that particular point.

The start of her chase established, she turned Conflagration's head northward for a brief digression—her first visit to Seth Gilson's new camp. Ten minutes' riding brought her within sight of a pair of brown tents and a shelter of boughs which protected a camp stove and table.

She did not hope to gain information as she rode down upon the temporary habitation—the stolen band had passed too far below. But she would sound an alarm and gain time by borrowing a canteen of water and a saddle bag of food. And perhaps— Well, the mule-man had seemed glad that he was to camp within call in case of trouble. Surely she was now in trouble—and even more surely Seth Gilson was not the sort of man to permit her to ride and face it alone!

Disappointment awaited her, however, for Alonzo Funk alone emerged from the smaller tent in answer to her hail. She might have been forewarned had she not been so preoccupied with her own thoughts, as Hercules—the truck—was parked nowhere about. She first asked for Gilson.

“He's been away two days on some government business,” said the old expert, his tone regretful



at the blank expression of her face. "I'm expecting him any hour."

Succinctly as possible she explained that her market band had been run off during the night.

"Before midnight, to be exact," said Alonzo, shaking his head. "Their passing must have been the distant noise that awakened me from my first sleep. At the time I thought it a dry thunderstorm crossing the desert."

Gloriana groaned inwardly. The stampedeers, then, had a long start; the difficulties of overtaking them were increased. Her deepest gratitude was that she had Conflagration, a horse among a million in emergency. She gained hope, too, from the knowledge that the reds would be hard to drive once the wastes began to reflect the burn of the sun. They would require water and rest. In that fact lay her chance.

She first overruled Alonzo's protest against her striking into the desert alone; then vetoed his offer to go with her. Didn't she know the Solemncholy, which had been just beyond their front yard all her life? The only horse available to carry him never could keep pace with Con. She could follow the trail faster alone, and locating the drive was first and most important. Tumble Weed and

the Apaches would certainly be along to reenforce her before it was necessary to give battle.

Reluctantly the old geologist agreed with her, although uttering warnings against the desert while he stuffed the saddle bags with food and she filled a large canteen.

"When Mr. Gilson returns you'll tell him—" she began after mounting.

"The chief will give me the devil for letting you go alone, and then he'll take after you like the same," interrupted Funk.

Gloriana shook her head. "If he has time to spare in my service, ask him to go after the man behind the drive. He'll know whom I mean and where likely to find him. Tell him to have the scoundrel ready for a real reckoning when I come back with the nags."

Her hand tingling from the strength of Alonzo's grip, her ears echoing with his "Good luck, brave girl!" Gloriana rode back to her man-sized task alone.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE KINGDOM OF SUN-FIRE

STRAIGHT as a die ran the trail, the past impact of scores of hoofs showing plainly through the troughs and over the crests of yellowish sand billows. For the first few miles away from the foothills grease-wood grew in scattered tufts; then salt-bushes reared their hardy tops. But at last the desert really asserted its blighting nature and not even a weed was to be seen in the siltlike sand of the level.

The footing was right for speed, but the hour commanded steady plodding. Gloriana permitted Con to set his own pace, after appraising the beast of the seriousness of the stint before him by checking his initial over-eagerness. There was little for her to do, and so much depended upon the horse. For minutes at a time she rode with her eyes closed against the glare, having forgotten to ask for goggles at the camp. Always she held herself as lightly as possible in the saddle, frequently changing her position to ease the load.

There had been times in her distant past when, from the shade of a *palo-breya* tree growing on the porphyry rim, she had looked out upon this arid world and loved it for the wondrous colors that hung, like veils, about it. But now, in the midst of it, the colors were blurred and she could feel only hate. It became to her Nature's most cruel, hideous monstrosity. Each tint was a lapping tongue of flame, each air-wave a destroying, fetid breath.

"The Kingdom of Sun-fire," she quoted. "Every leaf a spine, each living thing possessed of bite or sting, the very horizon a lurid desolation!"

Her heart was wrung for her beautiful reds, doubtless being driven mercilessly through the heat made golden indeed by the small dust-particles which it snatched up. As the straight-ahead going continued hour upon hour, she was forced to one distressing conclusion:

The raid could not have been designed merely to cause her trouble and heavy loss by scattering her splendid band on the desert. Had that been its object, the dispersement must already have commenced, and would have been indicated by forking trails.

It would seem that her enemy had determined

to take the whole risk at a gulp: that the drive was headed for the Mexican border, where brand-blotting was an art and the market easy, with no questions asked. Probably he was making the rustle with the aid of hirelings more trained to the plains than had been Jazz and Spider of the ill-fated "party." From what she knew of the dapper horse-trader, she could not conceive of himself enduring the discomfort of a desert hike. She pictured him, rather, sitting snug in his office at the Eureka Stables, his feet on his desk, a black cigar sagging from the corner of his mouth—perhaps fanning himself with a palm-leaf as he built up the alibi of his presence in Rabbit Ear.

There it was that she hoped Seth Gilson would ride, when he learned of her loss on his return to the survey camp. Just what he could do when he found the scamp, just how he might bring the raid home to him, she did not know. But she felt she had reason to hope that one who had such a knack at picking deserters and dodgers would think of some way.

While Con moved along at his never-flagging pace, breathing in the heat-waves as though they were ocean breezes, she gave thought to her own position. A drive to Mexico—and the steady

south by east course paralleling the saw-toothed foot-hills seemed to stamp this as one—would be far worse for her than a mere stampede into the desert. Once across the Rio Grande, the gallant Frazer reds would be lost to her forever—lost to the army, she corrected herself, since the forfeiture of prestige in the official market hurt her even more deeply than the financial damage.

How was she going to face the remount officers, already on a tour which would include Blaze Ranch because of her father's written promises, without a single horse of cavalry age and grade?

Of course there were her mules, for she did not doubt the safety of her personal herd on the upper ranch—too sagacious to be stampeded, too stubborn to suffer night driving by alien raiders. But what would count a parcel of mule flesh, even hand-trained mules such as hers, when the crying need was for officers' mounts? They would be only incidental.

And Daddy Blazes? Suppose he came limping back from that Mexican trip, broken-hearted at having failed to find Mother Marge, in the deepest depths from hope aroused only to be cruelly denied? How in the world could she nerve herself to tell him that she had disregarded his wishes;



upset his plans for a sentiment, righteous though she still believed it; broken his faith with the government?

Fervently she wished that Philomena were brushing stirrups with her—to curse for her.

Since the forewoman's brand of consolation did not come naturally to her lips, she turned to Conflagration, a more effusive comforter, although not so solid as Daniel Dunn.

"We simply can't weaken, Connie," she leaned forward to half-sob into the dust-lobed ear which at once waggled back. "We can't disappoint the U. S. A. and Daddy Blazes and—and everybody. We must—we *will* get back those reds in time for inspection! Promise your help like the worthy side-kick you've always been, and I'll cheer up—I will, honest to Goshen!"

The big horse responded by quickening his pace from a sensible walk to his favorite cow-trot. And until the determination of his stride had quickened her own blood, the girl did not check him.

To counteract any ill effects of this small spurt and not have to pay for it later, she presently drew rein beside a *sangre de dragon*. That their coming frightened away the humming-bird which had been sitting upon one of its thorns proved a

small satisfaction to her. What was the use of the giddy flitter's preening herself in such a dreary land?

Dismounting, she opened the canteen, moistened the flannel bonnet which the old geologist had thoughtfully provided for Con's head, forced a drink of the precious water down his throat, and washed his mouth. Herself she did not permit even a swallow from the container, but cut through the bark of the water-holding dragon and sucked the sap.

Thus refreshed, with small drain on the saddle-borne supply, they again took up the chase.

It was four o'clock by Gloriana's wrist-watch when the first real discouragement came. Con descended over an embankment into a dry wash, crossed it and climbed a horizontal shelf to a low *mesa*, where all sign of trail abruptly ceased, leaving the sand as unmarked as a freshly polished floor.

Gloriana knew what had happened. Since the passing of the drive a desert whirlwind, carrying long columns of dust, had eddied across the track, effectively covering it with particles which the storm had tired of carrying. There was no way of telling how wide the blanket had been spread, but for a mile or more she held to the same gen-

eral direction. As there was still no hint of earlier travel, she began to criss-cross on the chance of picking it up.

Five o'clock found the desert still trailless, the heat more stifling, her own spirit wilted. Con, too, seemed to sense that they had lost their only clue, to be depressed by their situation. For the first time he stopped of his own accord.

Gloriana rose in the stirrups and peered around her, for a time finding nothing upon which to focus her gaze in the utter desolation. As she was about to settle back into the saddle for more of the well-nigh hopeless criss-crossing, an object growing straight up in the desert caught her eye. It looked to be only a "Crucifixion" thorn, but as a unique growth on this particularly barren *mesa*, she rode toward it.

Nearing it, however, she came upon surprise. Instead of the leafless bush which experts declare was created for no other purpose than the glorification of a thorn *as* a thorn, this spike was thornless; instead of the small, yellow flowers which, in this month, should have been blooming from its stem, this oddity grew only a single flag of blue and white.

When she realized that she was riding down upon one of the Gilson-placed water sign-posts,

she urged her mount forward that she might the sooner read its message.

FRESH WATER SPRING  
GRASS IN SEASON  
THREE MILES DUE WEST  
USE COMPASS  
U. S. GEOL. SURVEY

There it was, enameled in white upon a blue ground, a word of cheer to whomsoever thirsty might come that way! Its galvanized iron post suggested that it probably had been one of the Hercules cargo which her mules had wrested from the quicksands of the Lost-and-Found.

Although it did not point out the trail of her reds, the small sign-board seemed to have offered Gloriana a suggestion that might sensibly be obeyed—like advice from her sign-post man himself. Afterward they could take up the hunt with fresh spirit; after the sun had gone down and been replaced by that full moon of which Tumble Weed had been prating.

"*You'd* have been glad to see this sign, little mother!" she breathed with eyes turned upward to the low-hanging sky. "You're glad for your child's sake now, I know."

The wisdom of experience was writ in that admonition to "use compass"—that Gloriana well knew. The flag of the sign might be twisted and turned by desert blasts, so the pointing arrow could not be trusted; but no one travels the desert without a magnetic direction-finder. Having retrieved hers from one of the saddle-bags and sighted her course, she remounted and put off for the foot-hills which for once, it would seem, were not a mirage and no farther distant than they looked.

Half-way there, her eyes opened to a sight that thrilled, then filled her with a thought so daring that she scarcely dared consider it. Conflagration, caressed by her spur, sprang ahead.

Just within the shadow cast upon the desert fringe by the cathedral range, for which the foot-hills looked to be architectural supports, ran the desert monarch, Streak, at the head of a greater troop than ever she had seen him lead before. Magnificently fit was the look of every beast in the train, of a size and strength calculated to survive. And the king himself—positively colossal he seemed; almost fearsome and quite unreal, until she remembered how the heated atmosphere distorts proportions.

The Streak's band appeared to be headed for the very *barranca* which Gloriana already had de-

cided led into the promised land of water and grass to which the sign-post directed. And if they should enter first—if the park beyond should prove a *cul-de-sac*, as so many of them did— Oh, it was too unlikely for sober consideration, she told herself, even while she was rushed toward them with Con's longest stride!

She might as well enjoy the sight while it lasted, for the Streak soon would scent their alien presence, disown his tamed son, and lead his outlaws into the rougher country for escape. There was no harm in estimating their number, however; one, two—yes, there must be three hundred reds and sorrels in the train. If only she could corral these wildlings and use them to replace her stampeded own!

But away with so vaunting a fancy! She laughed even as she urged Con to continued speed. Why tease herself with the futile shooting of arrows to the sun? For years the Streak had proved himself wise to human wiles; his life-time had that silken hide remained immune to the scar of man-cast lead.

And then, before her very eyes, the miracle happened. With head erect and tail flying, the outlaw king seemed to float into the *barranca*, the entire band trailing. In his own stamping ground,



so seldom visited by his human enemy, it must be that he had for once let down his caution. Moreover, he could not have got their scent, since the beginnings of the night breeze carried from the foot-hills into the desert.

Stopping just long enough to un-sling her rifle, Gloriana again pursued, hoping against hope, although no longer chiding herself that she did hope.

But the Streak had not thrown all caution to the wind. As they neared the *barranca*, she and Con, he trotted out to a stand upon a rise of ground. There he stood with head high, nostrils sniffing, fore-top flaring, tail flowing to his heels.

Another moment, and he perceived them as though binoculars had been fitted to his eyes. She could see him stamp. His whistle of alarm came to her ears in a shrill blast. Another moment and he would whirl, summon his troop, and be off with them over some impossible trail.

"Steady, Con!" cried Gloriana as her rifle raised.

The Streak cavorted, then started back toward the *barranca*, in his sense of responsibility risking everything to warn his own.

Carefully the girl took aim. When the sights lined with his foretop, she fired.

For a few strides, the king-beast continued; but the strides were automatic. Within a dozen yards he crashed to the ground.

Gloriana scarcely could breathe as her mount covered the distance to the side of his fallen sire, just within the neck of the gully. She was out of the saddle before he had fairly stopped, was leaning over the dethroned monarch with a feeling of guilt, an admixture of terror and grief. But after a moment she lifted an exultant face toward Con, who was snorting excitedly.

"I *just* did it—just barely did it!" she exclaimed. "Don't worry, Connie. Your daddy will come out of it fit as a fiddle in a few hours."

Arising, she threw her arms around the bay neck, quite unnerved by the strain of her feat. To her it would have been a crime to have killed so splendid a creature, as like the Con she was caressing as parent may be like son.

She had accomplished what she intended—had brought him down without taking his life; had improved that thousandth chance of sending a bullet through one of the upper equine vertebrae in the delicate operation called "creasing."

First fettering the Streak against a too-early return to conscious activity—using the hobbles

she so seldom needed upon Con's slender ankles—she crept stealthily up the gulch to a point which afforded survey of the "park."

This proved, as she had hoped, to be a veritable *cul-de-sac*, a natural corral carpeted with grass green from the watering of springs. There the wild troop were resting from what evidently had been a movement of length. There Tumble Weed and the Apaches would find them when they had followed-up, since her rope, stretched across the mouth of the *barranca*, and her signal fire just beyond would serve to hold the outlaws until she could gather a force sufficient to herd them back to Blaze Ranch corrals. Her thought on first sight of them had not, then, been too daring—too vainglorious! Splendidly would they replace her own lost legion for the inspection and sale that was all but due!

## CHAPTER XXIV :

### WHAT WOMAN ?

SEVERAL eventualities were responsible for Gloriana Frazer's presence in the saddle skirting the Solemncholy before the sun-up next following the downfall of the untamed sorrel, Streak.

The first of these was a discovery made in the desert-edge park by Conflagration; but of that later, since it was not the immediate cause of her early morning race from out the Kingdom of Sun-fire.

That had not developed until after midnight, when the follow-up party, led by Philomena and Tumble Weed Gay, had aroused her from a sadly needed rest beside the signal fire which she had lighted at the mouth of the *barranca*. In addition to half a dozen young Apaches, her employees were also accompanied by Alonzo Funk.

"The chief sent me," the latter explained his presence. "He returned an hour after you rode into the desert."

"You delivered my message—my request?"

Alonzo nodded. "Soon as we had fed gasoline and water to Hercules he drove off, promising to make your despoiler wish the world had dried up before he was born."

Gloriana smiled at the simile, a characteristic addition from the old expert's own pessimism.

"Let's hope he gives Rabbit Ear some excitement, and Tim Rudd what he deserves," she added.

Then had come the startling news of the objective of her defender.

"Rabbit Ear? Timothy Rudd?" the geologist asked in a puzzled way. "The chief wasn't going first to the town, but to Emerald Ranch. I distinctly heard him say so."

What strange lack of judgment had taken the surveyor first to the Strongs? Why had he seen fit to repeat his call at a moment when she so urgently needed his help elsewhere? Of course she herself was in a measure responsible in having asked him to talk with Philip, yet she could not help feeling impatient over the Gilson-made delay in bringing Timothy Rudd to book.

Instinctive fear clutched her, not for Phil, but for the cheerful blunderer—for possible harm that

might come to Gilson in his ill-timed effort to keep faith with her. Perhaps the punishment he planned for Rudd was of the sort from which a man might not return, previous to which he attends all unfinished business.

A sense of personal obligation tortured her. Suppose that he and Philip clashed again! His gun had the virtue of "not holding fire a moment too long," she had heard him say. Perhaps in this case it would; perhaps—

Oh, she had not meant to send him on any such desperate mission! She must reach him in time, must restrain him, must explain.

After having given Philomena instructions regarding the herd, she had saddled Con and started across the star-roofed desert.

Just now dawn leaped from nowhere in particular and leveled refreshed, bright glances over the desolation where had been brooding only the spooks of the night. By certain landmarks thus brought into relief, the girl appreciated that she had made better time than she could have expected, that she had arrived at the last lap of the long, anxious ride. What a horse was her Connie—not one other in a million could have met the emergency as had he! Fervently she gave the



beast all credit for their really remarkable feat of desert-going against time.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the changed lighting, she began to believe that a small, vague spot ahead was increasing and darkening; that, in fact, a lone horseman was heading into the desert from the foot-hill fringe. A few moments later, calculation augured that their trails must cross at a point not far ahead. The possibility that this was due to design on the part of him approaching brought the thought that he might prove to be Seth Gilson himself; that, having attended all relegated tasks in her service, he was on his way to volunteer further aid.

As the distance separating them grew less, however, she saw that the rider was small, shrunken, ill-clad and without saddle; was, as soon developed beyond peradventure of doubt, an Indian. In view of her bitter disappointment, her later recognition of Always Busy scarce brought her surprise. That he had not recognized her was probable, as he rode belaboring his cayuse, apparently anxious for the meeting.

Not until almost upon her did he pull up. Then he sat staring at her with snag-toothed mouth agape, his jaw quivering as if from some shock, his eyes dilated by a look of fear.

"Ugh—missey!" he grunted, even as he turned the unkempt pony about, evidently to ride away.

"Wait a minute—and note I've got you covered!" Gloriana halted him after a swift movement toward her holster. "Why are you so disappointed that it is missey?"

"Me hunt—other white squaw," he mumbled, uneasy from the eye to eye glance of her gun, knowing well by repute her quickness with it.

"Another white squaw out here? How could there be another?"

He did not answer, simply shook as he sat; then he began to leap like a vocalized jumping-jack upon his blanket.

Gloriana, having decided that he should not retreat into the lethargy of their last verbal combat, had punctuated her questions with a bullet just past one ear, a second that frayed his overalls and a third that came mighty near a dangling big toe.

"Me tell—Missey Gloryfrazee! Me tell good truth!" His interpolations were hasty and separated by less intelligible utterances, probably imprecations in his native tongue. "She escape out the wickiup when Busy's squaw drink up his booze-water."

*"Escaped!"*

At the sharp-pointed exclamation aimed his way, the old buck teetered upon his horse, then fell to the sand as though mortally wounded by one of the leaden missiles which his questioner had taken such adequate care should not hit him.

Quick as a puma, Gloriana flung down after him, bent over him, grasped his shoulders roughly.

"You can't play 'possum on me, Always Never," she insisted. "You're plumb scared to death of me, and you know it."

"Me scared—plumb dead." He seized upon the idea with satisfaction and sank back into a feigned stupor.

The girl, exasperated by the delay of his tactics, shook him until it seemed that his snags of teeth must become dislodged.

"You say that a white woman escaped from your wickiup while you were away and your squaw was drunk—that you are out hunting her? *What woman?*"

Perforce he sat up; further mutterings jounced from his lips.

"No, no. Busy drunk, not good red squaw. He talk crazy words from booze-water. He not look for woman—for stray cayuse."

Gloriana, however, could both smell and see that he had not been drinking. He had had

time to decide that, were she going to kill him, she would have done so already. And indeed she was not. Not for worlds must any harm come to the lazy old scoundrel who might hold the skeleton key to the whole ghoulish situation.

He had entered her house, had searched for and appropriated the convincing packet, had disturbed nothing else and discarded that only in the extremity of his capture by Eddie Bristo. This early morning he was hurrying unwontedly over the desert in search of some one—probably a white woman, as he had let slip in his first surprise.

A wonderful possibility was irradiating the dreary desert-scape, a hope better grounded than any since she had thought such a hope dead nearly four years ago. If the precious lost Marge was still alive, if, indeed, she had recently come out of a state of aphasia induced by her sufferings, as the letter purporting to be from Mexico but mailed in their own Rabbit Ear had said—if those radiant possibilities developed into fact, why not the further one that this very Indian had found her groping through the sands and taken her in charge?

“Busy,” she stated, “you hunt for my mother, the Dark Rose.”

Not a sign of surprise did he show. Evidently made more comfortable by the deflection of the topic from himself, he wagged his head.

"Bad lie—very bad lie," he said.

"*You* tell the lie!" she accused. "And you'd better quit, for your jig is up. I've got you right. You tell missey the truth or she'll send you to the white man's jail for stealing from her house. You forget your coat with the valuables in the pocket; that convicts you."

But her insinuated threat did not move him. Since he knew she was not going to kill him, it really was he who had her "right." She tried the effect of a money bribe, counting upon his well-known cupidity; he showed no interest, however, in the several figures she named. She reminded him of his volunteered promise that day she had rescued him from the ordeal by cacti that she would not be sorry "some day." *This* was the day she declared—the hour. No use for further denials; she did not believe him. He had committed himself beyond retraction in his utterances. Why not show that his tongue was not always twisted by telling her how he came to be hunting the desert for the "white squaw"—her own mother?

When he remained undisturbed in his refuge

of silence, she straightened and considered rapidly. Her first impulse, that of herself trying to comb the desert, she discarded for two reasons. One was the hopeless vastness of the sand wastes, which made the recruiting of an adequate party the quicker course toward the thorough search which must be started. The second was her earlier fear for the safety of Seth Gilson. Two might be saved if she rode hard and straight. Both might be lost if she lingered.

"Up with them—and be busy!" She broke her decision crisply.

When the Indian, with raised hands, had achieved his feet, she relieved his belt of the antiquated, rusty weapon for which he had at no recent moment felt safe to reach and, after search, his pocket of a business-like clasp knife.

"Now, all aboard! 'Bout face and see that you get the best out of that cayuse! Remember there's an avenging she-devil just behind!"

"She-devil—Red Glory," he agreed, with a slow grin.

The procession thus formed set out at a pace unhampered by conversation to cover the remaining arid miles. That the thoughts of the captive riding in the lead were of an active sort was improbable. Those of his captor matched the



speed of flying hoofs, but not to any definite conclusions.

Suppose her hope were true, why had the Indian held their littlest pard—their fragile, fragrant Rose—to the wither of the intervening months and years? How could he dare pretend ignorance of her identity until she came from out the mental haze that mercifully had surrounded her and called for her Blaze and her Glory?

Could the sardonically named Always Busy, whose choice of activities was sitting all day on his haunches, be demented, as many believed? Or was he more shrewd than ever had been suspected, shrewd enough to attempt the long-laid scheme of extortion which had taken her father to Mexico? Was the gentle hostage, through agents of the Indian, to have been transported to some distant rendezvous and there exchanged for the ransom named; or was Blaze to have been decoyed circuitously nearer home?

The remembrance that Always Busy could neither read nor write suggested a more likely solution. The answer to the riddle might be that Timothy Rudd, not long since from Missouri, had met up with the Apache trying to find some way

to profit by his charge, and "staked" him to the ransom idea.

Feeling herself growing only the more confused, as her efforts to understand multiplied, Gloriana forced speculation behind her and gave her whole mind to the trail. With but two or three breaks in gait to breathe their mounts, they reached the governmental camp near the ford.

A hasty glance under the flap of the sleeping tent showed both cots undisturbed. And nearly twenty-four hours had passed since Seth Gilson had driven off to do her bifold bidding—to visit the home of the jealous suitor who had warned him not to come near, and to capture that other man, who had broken so many laws to harass her!

Arriving at Blaze Ranch a few minutes later, she confined her prisoner in the empty root-house, with an amply armed and personally vengeful cook-lady as guard.

Two definite objects impelled her return to the saddle after a hasty breakfast; she must call out the entire resource of the range to sift the desert for that escaped "white squaw"; and she must find the sign-post man.

## CHAPTER XXV

### FROM OUT THE VAULT

FOR the first time, the daughter of "old Blaze" Frazer rode in through the open gates and along the front walk of that envied stucco mansion, Emerald Ranch-House. With no pause to admire it on close view, she dropped rein and hurried up the steps.

When no one answered her ring, her impatience increased. As the door was wide thrown, she stepped into the hall. Other open doors showed luxuriously furnished rooms on either side, but no sign of life. Certainly hearsay had not been at fault in reporting the splendors of this "palace" of the West; but did no one live within?

Along the hall, carpeted with the thickest rugs upon which her feet ever had trod, she hurried. Without encountering any one, she continued until she brought out on a gallery which surrounded a tiled patio, where a fountain played and cooling palms were grouped.

With relief she caught the sound of voices above

the water's splash. She stepped toward the side room from which they seemed to emanate.

"I've done my best!"

Phil it was who had spoken, and she hurried her steps.

This door also was open, doubtless to increase the circulation of air, since a screen of reeds stood just inside, shutting off a clear view of the interior.

"Done your worst, you mean, and a fine mess you've made of things!"

The voice was that of the "Silver Fox," Strong, Sr., raised in anger.

Through the reed weave of the screen she vaguely saw him seated behind a desk—a large man, inclined to stoutness and, as she knew by report, to apoplectic rages. Phil stood at the side of the desk, his face flushed and angry. There was some satisfaction in the fact that he showed no signs of recent struggle—perhaps, after all, he and the surveyor had not yet met. Just possibly Funk had been mistaken in Seth Gilson's intended destination, or Gilson had changed his mind after starting.

Before she was around the reed screen, however, the futility of the hope was established—the parent speaking.

"I suppose you are proud of yourself to have made a prisoner of a government employee! Where have you hidden away his white-elephant truck? And, in Heaven's name, where is he?"

"He came here looking for trouble, but I saw him first. He never knew what struck him—never will know."

"You haven't, perchance, killed him?"

The girl peered until after she had seen the negative shake of Phil's head; that was enough for her. She simply could not wait to hear more. Seth Gilson was a prisoner somewhere about Emerald ranch, suffering, perhaps wounded, in her behalf—at her behest—and by the hand of the young man whom she had for years considered her "fate."

Inspired by initiative above her reason, she moved at once into the breach. Feeling like a woman in some gruesome nightmare, but looking very much awake and as steady as the automatic which her hand had found in the period of superacute perceptions, she stepped in upon the two.

"You will give the government employee over to me—at once!"

Her gun covered them.

For a moment father and son simply stared

in their complete surprise, as they might have stared at the sleep-walker she felt herself.

Philip, Jr., recovered first, but only sufficiently to murmur: "Glory!"

The sound of the name seemed to animate the senior. He leaned a trifle forward in his chair; his plump hand slipped along the desk-top toward an open drawer.

But the girl sensed its possible quest and brought her aim to more definite point.

"Up!" she said.

Both the Stronges obeyed.

Gloriana advanced to the desk, reached across it into the drawer and withdrew the revolver for which the older man had been reaching. She broke the weapon and removed the cylinder, tossing the useless frame upon the desk.

"Your pop-gun—butt first and no tricks now!" she demanded of Philip.

He well knew how quick and sure her fire could be. With a muttered curse, he handed her the "fancy" pistol he affected.

"Try some of your famous finesse, governor," he suggested.

"You whelp!"

His parent evidently considered the advice good, however, displeased as he was with the



source of it, for he turned a conciliatory gaze upon their unexpected visitor.

"And now, young woman, if you're satisfied that we have nothing more concealed, won't you enlighten us as to the meaning of these dramatics?"

"You heard me—I want Seth Gilson!"

Since the disarmament, her eyes had been searching the room, while she pondered possibilities of the likeliest place to look for a man who hadn't had time to know "what struck him!" Her interest centered upon a steel door which evidently gave into the strong-room of the ranch-house.

"Has the excessive heat gone to your head, Miss Frazer?" the Silver Fox continued, his voice solicitous. "Whom is it you seek? What possibly could lead you to believe you'd find friends of yours here?"

Gloriana's smile was not for his feigned concern. In the lock of the vault door, a key was in place.

"Pray don't worry about me." She glanced at the son. "Suppose you back up to that door, Phil. Turn the key you'll find there. Open."

"Don't you move, Philip," contradicted "P. H." "Young woman, I must protest that you're going too far. I'd hate to accuse even a

Frazer of such a high-handed attempt at robbery, but that vault contains valuables. For your own protection, you should not want it opened while you are here."

Gloriana seemed not to have heard—took a step toward her admirer.

"Quick now—you know me!"

When Seth Gilson stepped into the room, his face wore a pleasant, even happy look, although his fists were ready clinched and his mind so prepared for battle that Strong, Sr., narrowly escaped a blow. Only the girl's glad cry saved the "fox." They all missed the look of amazement on his face that a man should step forth from the vault which he had been trying to defend.

"Thank God—thank God, you're safe!" Gilson paused to say in a low voice to the girl. "What might be happening to you was the worst torment of that steel cage when at last I woke up."

"And you?"

Neither of them realized the incongruity of her pistol gesture toward a bandage about his head.

"Nothing but a scalp wound," he assured her. "It was bandaged for me by— That is to say, I bandaged it myself, so I ought to know."

She focused a tiger-glare upon her splendid-looking suitor. "For shame! But I'm not surprised. Some unrecognized instinct always tried to warn me that I'd be disappointed in you."

From him she returned to Gilson.

"Tell me, why did you come here, instead of going after Timothy Rudd, as I expected when I left word with Funk?"

For just an instant the sign-post man looked positively embarrassed.

"Poor Timothy!" he murmured, as if to himself, and then: "You see, Sheriff Sobey conferred the honor of a nonsalaried deputyship upon me the other day and when Alonzo told me of your trouble I knew where to come for the first catch."

In a flash that took them all by surprise, he turned on the younger Strong.

"Consider yourself under arrest for the rustling of Miss Frazer's market band!"

"But you can't arrest him for that!" cried Gloriana.

"*Can't?* You watch me!"

"You really can't—you have no case. My reds were not stolen. They were enticed away."

"Same thing."

"Not when the Stronges didn't do the enticing," the girl persisted.

"Then who did steal the red band?"

"The Streak and his train of outlaws. Oh, you needn't look so disappointed! You should be glad that there's nothing more for you to do. I brought the leader down last night with a lucky shot. He's my prisoner, safe with my forewoman and a half-dozen Apaches, to say nothing of Tumble Weed Gay and your Alonzo."

Briefly she related her capture and the crease-shot which had proved that the desert monarch was not a spirit horse, supernaturally immune to the bullets of man.

"I owe to Conflagration the next best news," she exulted. "Not until I rode him to water within the park could I be sure of the full extent of my good fortune—the answer to your question of who did steal the red band. He solved the mystery by recognizing our own horses among the wild ones. While Rudd's sorry crew were waiting for their dope to work on Tumble Weed, the Streak must have made a rustle of his own. He can stampede the soberest nag that ever rubbed noses, you know. As a result, I'm in a hundred or so horses. So, you see, the only thing you've got against this fine example of what jealousy will do to an alleged man is the knock-out he gave you. Rudd is the real thief by intention,

but he must wait for his deserts. There's something more important—"

"Hate to contradict a lady or upset her very logical sounding deductions, but fact is fact," interrupted the surveyor. "Tim Rudd's worst crime was that initial cruelty to the buckskin cayuse and he's already paid for it by losing the sharpest horse trade it has ever been his impudence to try to make."

Gloriana stared her astonishment—indeed, her look verged on disbelief. With the Eureka Stable man eliminated, all her labored speculations as to recent inflictions would crumple like a house of cards.

"You mean he didn't send those thugs to frighten me?" she gasped.

Gilson shook his head. "Rudd has an unfortunate habit of appearing at moments most inopportune—for himself."

"Then who is responsible?"

"The man I just put under arrest."

She turned, bewildered. "Philip—*you*?" she asked, with sort of a moan. "Then you—you are just a scurvy coyote, in spite of your fine looks?"

Her accusation seemed to bring remembrance to the elder Strong. With a snarl, he lunged across the table toward his son.

"So I'm not the only one you've double-crossed, young whelp! Now I *know* you robbed my safe of that bundle of keepsakes! What did you do it for? In hope of marrying this highfalutin' girl of old Blaze Frazer? Well, she's too good for you—I can see that at a glance—and I thank God, you'll get yours!"

"You, too, when Blaze Frazer returns from Mexico," put in Gilson, turning on the speaker sternly. "I arrest you along with your son."

A new impulse moved Gloriana. Stepping across to Gilson, she urged: "He spoke of a bundle of keepsakes. He may be referring to something that means a lot to me. Help me make him explain—force him to tell——"

But Gilson interrupted her.

"There's no need to force the truth from him. You must brace up now; be prepared for a shock. I wish I could explain, could give you time, but—If you'll hold your gun on this couple of scoundrels, I'd best show you what I mean."

Lifting his concerned gaze from hers, he returned to the vault and for a moment was lost to sight in the shadows of the sizable chamber which seemed to lie beyond the steel door. No need had Gloriana to use her gun, for both Strongs sat slumped in their chairs.



"Be brave, you Glory of a girl!"

Gilson's anxious voice preceded his reappearance. Now he stepped into range of the steel door space. He was not alone. Who could have been imprisoned with him in the vault? Whose was the frail, black-clad shape, clinging to his hand, half-carried by his arm?

Gloriana leaned forward to gaze—to make sure. Her pistol arm was still held in readiness for a false move from the Strongs. She did not swoon, felt no inclination to scream. A great pæan of thanksgiving seemed about to burst the confines of her heart, pressed upward for utterance. Several times her lips moved to voice that prayer, but trembled without a sound. Then in one all-comprehensive word she breathed the whole:

*"Mother!"*

Her gun clattered to the floor. Forward she stretched arms that ached from the emptiness of years.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### YEARS ARE BRIDGED

As Seth Gilson relinquished his burden, he felt it a sacrilege that the two who had been the cause of so cruel a separation should be permitted to witness the reunion.

Where was Blaze? That had been the "littlest pardner's" first concern after making sure of the well-being of her child.

Gloriana had drawn her apart, to soothe and explain. While they murmured the soft, unfinished endearments of that most sacred human relationship, the surveyor compelled both Stronges to retire into the vault which they had lately used as a prison for their separate hostages. With the key turned they would be safe enough there, as he knew from his own futile efforts at escape, until he was ready to start with them to the county jail.

The most comfortable chairs in the luxurious office he then drew to the window, where the breeze seemed coolest, and into one urged the little lady, of whose continued existence he first

had become acquainted inside the vault. Truly she looked the "Rose" he had heard described, with dew-wet eyes upon her daughter, cheeks flushed with the color of happiness, lips wafting a love that was sweeter than all a garden's scent.

The arm of that same chair was as far away as Gloriana cared to be. Himself seated upon the desk, his long legs dangling, he listened to the hurried tale that bridged the years.

She told of a sand-storm on the desert; of three travelers, equally inexperienced and none equipped with a compass, separated from their party; of the passage of the storm which, in its fury, obliterated all tracks; of long, ensuing hours wandering in alternate hope and fear; of the saddle canteens which all too soon had been emptied; of an absolute lack of food. Because Mother Marge's horse, a Blaze Ranch red, was stronger than the mounts of her companions, she had been able to keep on long after they had fallen to the dust. The last she remembered was giving the beast his head on the chance that his instinct, rather than human reasoning, would find a way out.

About what happened afterward she could report nothing of her own knowledge—only what had been told her by Always Busy, his squaw and

that incomprehensible fiend who, in her youth, had claimed to love her—Philip Strong, Sr.

Almost had her mount succeeded in working his way to the water that meant life. The Apache eccentric, prowling the Solemncholy fringe, had chanced upon her lying beside the body of her horse. He had carried her to a deserted wickiup, shunned by the really sane of his people because said to be haunted by the desert dead. She must have been very ill, but he had brought his own squaw to the shack and the two had nursed her back to physical, if not mental recovery.

Through the lazy buck's vigils beside her couch of boughs, an idea of pecuniary reward must have come to him. Knowing full well who she was from the moment of first finding her, he had delayed report until sure that she would live, then had started for Blaze Ranch to bargain with the distraught Frazers, taking her veil and the amulet from her wasted wrist as substantiation of his story.

On the trail he had met the elder Strong, whose suspicion he had aroused by asking where Blaze Frazer was most likely to be found. Strong himself had bought the news which Always Busy wished to market and had hatched a truly diabolical scheme of revenge upon the man who had

won in their youthful rivalry. Straightway a pack-animal had been loaded with necessities for a protracted exile in the Indian ménage of the "Rose" whose sweetness had caused so much of love and hate.

Regular visits from Strong and the regular payment of dole—a princely income to the Always Busys—not only had silenced the Indian couple, but had separated them from their tribe. The son's suspicion had not been excited until a few weeks previous, when he had trailed the buck to his isolated wickiup and there had discovered the secret reason for his parent's repeated absences from home.

Time had begun again for the little recluse only about two months back. A fearful yearning had startled her from her former contented state. She had cried aloud one day for Blaze—her Blaze—and Glory. The Apache, frightened, had struck out at once and returned with his employer. The reproaches that came to her, the bitterness that increased daily with the lifting of the mists from her mind, Strong countered by pointing out his tender care of her, his lifelong passion, his hope that she would free herself from the husband she had preferred to him in her youth and would accept the luxury he could heap upon her in a latter-

day, but all the more prized companionship. A triumph indeed it would have been to have won her to his will.

How she had repulsed him and pled with him that she be restored to her own; how he seemed to suffer over her hate of him as much as she over his love for her; how he put her off, declaring that he must find a way out for both of them, the while having her guarded night and day. . . .

The pitiful, faltering story, told with many a fearing glance around, lest a new trap of the huntsman be sprung, hurt the imagination.

Then last night, the Silver Fox had appeared at the wickiup, in the absence of the man Apache guard, and informed her that he had decided to give up all for her; was willing at last to take her home. She was to start with him at once. The squaw he had promised a string of gold beads if she would tell the buck that their charge had headed for the Solemncholy in the night on the second of their two cayuses.

In terror of him, yet not daring to despair, the helpless bit of human flotsam, tossed up from a desert sea, had drifted on the tide of his evil will to Emerald Ranch. There she was told she must remain until he had "figured things out." For the overnight safety of them both, she must



be secreted, he said. He opened the door into what she later learned was the vault room. The steps of some one coming along the hall hurried him. He pushed her inside. Then her ears first heard the rasp of a key locking the door of a new prison.

"And thus I made one of the loveliest acquaintances of my life," said Seth Gilson, smiling as naturally and amiably as he could, by way of holding the overwrought twain to normal. "With the aid of the last matches in my case, we looked each other over and decided we had done pretty well—considering."

"But how came you both to be—"

"That was really a mistake due to having only one cell in the house. They should have more—a family like this. The old scoundrel hadn't an idea the young one had preempted the nice room which he had previously fitted up with cot and chair for his star guest. And that 'valued' friend of yours didn't bother examining the interior when he chucked me in. Guess he was afraid I'd come to and, despite my weakened state, resent his treatment of me. Father must have had an awful jolt when I stepped out; and son sure looked wrought up when I escorted you into their presence, little madam."

Gloriana, holding jealously to that small white hand over which the good-luck bracelet had been slipped, sighed, smiled, sighed again.

"There's one principal question I want to ask you, friend. Why did you come here seeking the horse thief—how long have you suspected Phil Strong?"

"Only since yesterday morning, when Sobey and I finished putting one Rusty Wagner through a degree that really deserved a number of its own."

"Rusty? Is he the captive you brought back from the desert—the cause of that first set-to with—"

"Whiskers, none other," he asserted cheerfully. "I told you how he had offered me a hand in a scheme of plunder across the border that would bear further looking into. Your father was to have been the victim of the robbery—that I surmised when I learned of his leaving you for a more or less mysterious Mexican visit."

"Then it was Phil who sent that letter to my dad?"

Though his nod was curt, he bent upon her a lingering look, as if sympathizing with her and at the same time gauging just how greatly she was hurt.

"I lost time trying to connect up Timothy Rudd

and Whiskers. Before daybreak yesterday morning we forced the truth from Wagner, and I was on my way to you when Alonzo told me that the red band already had been run off. That made me so anxious to have my little talk with—with *Romeo* that I overstepped myself in my hurry."

"I'm beginning—to get—the meat of the pecan," murmured Gloriana excitedly. "The Fox got the news that I had ridden into the Solemncholy yesterday—likely would be followed by a force and the desert fringes thoroughly combed. That's what hustled him there in the night to get mother moved to some safer place!"

When Gilson had punched bells sans results and shouted through the halls without arousing a single servant, he concluded that the master must have declared a general holiday to clear the way for some further transfer of his especial *sub rosa* guest. He set out to retrieve his truck himself and found it in the garage, where it had taken the place of the racing car. After driving around to the door, he reentered the ranch office and again opened the vault of steel.

Strong, Sr., emerged first, looking broken in body and spirit, as men do on short notice when their crimes find them out. Gloriana let him

pass with only a loathing glance. But young Philip she faced with full fury.

"You knew that my heart was breaking for my mother—you could have saved me all that! Why didn't you do it?"

His dark eyes lifted to the yellow flames of hers, as if to save a hopeless cause from the burning.

"I did—what I did—for you."

"For me—all those inhuman things *for me?*" She choked back a hysterical laugh. "As your father did things for my mother, I suppose?"

"But I intended to reunite you after I was sure of you—once we were safely married," he further essayed. "My idea in sending your dad away was to hurry—"

"Then it was you—*you*, whom I was trusting and trying to help—who sent that hand-printed summons, with the tokens you had stolen from your father! Tell me, was it you also who sent Busy to get them back?"

His blank expression, his glance at his father, told convincingly that not he, but the elder Strong had instigated that search.

"And I suppose," continued the girl, trembling throughout her whole body from her access of con-

tempt, "you'd have taken our hard-saved five thousand away from your henchmen, as a proper reward for your goodness of heart, when you saw fit to reunite the Frazer family? So! You really did all these things for me?"

"To help you in the end," he insisted.

"To help yourself to me—you whom your own father has called a whelp!"

"Oh, Glory—Glory—don't be too hard on me! You don't know what a desperate man will do to win a girl he loves as I love you. I had to get your father away—don't you see that? I never could have won you with him around. Afterward I really was worried about you—was afraid to have you on the ranch alone. By fighting you, I thought to make you turn to me as your protector. And you would have, except for that grass-snake who has crowded me out. Your taste of victory through him changed you into a girl I scarcely knew. To defeat you was for your own best good, and I hoped—"

"It's lucky I judged my own best good!" she snapped. With a gesture signifying that she had heard enough from him, she turned to Gilson. "At that," she observed, with a flash of the Frazer humor, "I reckon I'm a better judge of horse-flesh than man-flesh."

"If at first you don't succeed, you know," he suggested in his sanguine way.

Then at once, he became again her mule-man of the set jaw and inscrutable eyes, busy with the detail of their home-going and the transport of the prisoners to Rabbit Ear.

"Where's that Apache?" he asked on sudden remembrance.

"Oh, he's *my* prisoner," declared Gloriana.

"I'd like to add him to my collection—won't you lend him to me?"

"You'd do anything for a prisoner—even borrow!" For the first time in the course of the grim proceedings, Gloriana managed a natural-sounding laugh.

By the time Gilson was ready, she had penned a telegram which he was to put on the wire immediately on reaching town—an imperative message, calculated to stop somebody from "starting" something down in the troublesome sister republic.

It read:

· BLAZE FRAZER:

· SAN IGNACIO, MEX.

Marge here and safe. Do not fear to believe. Hike  
for home and mother. GLORY-GIRL.



## CHAPTER XXVII

### SILENCE GIVES CONSENT

ON a morning ten days later, Gloriana Frazer and Seth Gilson rode together through the cañon and into Main Street, Rabbit Ear. The intervening days had been crowded to the last minute at Blaze Ranch. With the aid of punchers and stockmen who had rallied on hearing the news that the Streak was no longer at large, the renegade band and the stolen reds had been driven across the desert and into the home ranch corrals. Such as were old enough had passed the inspection of the remount officers, except the Streak, whom the young boss had not offered. The Frazer reds had gone through with the high praise for which Gloriana had worked and hoped. Government vouchers totaling a goodly sum had been sent to the bank.

But not a word had been heard from old Blaze. It was the delay of his return, the total absence of any news of him that caused the serious mien of the two riders. Out at the ranch, the littlest pardner was beginning to fret. So were the feminine principals in a double wedding within

the "outfit," scheduled for that eventful day, although, it must be said, Philomena and Mary Ellen matched each other in concealing all signs of eagerness from their prospective spouses.

When the wire had failed to bring so much as a report of whether or not the girl's summons home had been delivered in San Ignacio, Gilson had volunteered to grant himself a furlough from the geological survey and go south to seek the ranchman. He was, in fact, on his way to catch the local, and Gloriana was trying to frame sentences of an appreciation almost too heart-felt for words, when—

The agent-operator, on being asked for a ticket to Nogales and seeing Gloriana Frazer standing behind the would-be purchaser, raised a yellow envelope.

"Wait a minute—ladies first," he beamed through the wicket. "Here's a t-gram for you, Miss Glory, that'll bring a smile, I bet."

Gilson never did buy that ticket to Mexico. And the girl's smile as she read was indeed worth looking at.

Just back from blind trail. Yours to hand. I'm your best believer. Coming on or ahead of next train. Don't lift your eyes off Marge. Divide my love.

DADDY BLAZE.

After the start home, Gilson glanced speculatively at his riding mate several times. Finally he broke silence.

"Now that you've got everything and everybody else straightened out, Miss Young Lady, I wish you'd give a little time to me."

"You sure deserve all the time you want, Mr. Young Man."

"But I want a great deal—all the rest of your life. I wish you'd straighten me out by marrying me just as soon as you find it convenient."

Really startled, she looked at him. "Convenient?" was all she could think to say.

"Don't you feel any responsibility toward a fellow you roped in as you did me? I recognized you at once that first day as the woman I've been expecting all my grown-up life. Never knew before what you were going to look like or act like or wear, you see, which made it sort of confusing just at first. A rose in the hair, say, or any of those regular signs—even a cactus flower would have helped. Was always wondering whether I'd passed you in the crowd until that first day. Then I knew. Don't you think, Glory, that you've had plenty of time to recognize me—a sign-post man?"

Still startled, still looking, she saw all at once

through the strange film before his eyes—saw something wonderful and compelling in the true-blue back of their haze.

“A responsibility—*you?*” she stammered. “I’ll have to consider . . . I—I feel that I need advice . . . Reckon I’d best go and—and get it.”

Before he realized that she was leaving him, she had whirled Con about and was dashing over the road that led back into the town.

Never had Daniel Dunn’s blue-paint eyes looked down on her so disapprovingly. She should—she *must*, for her own self-respect, make him see that she was not as fickle a girl as she seemed.

After the way of some women and most men in argument, she began with incrimination.

“You likely were young and foolish yourself in your day, old tomahawk. I never knew a man yet who wasn’t sort of tickled to acknowledge it if you got him right. Come now, Danny, tell me: didn’t you imagine yourself in love with several girls before you met the missus? I’ll bet you did, a good-looking rawhide like you!”

While salaaming deeper in her customary squat at his feet, the flame-haired devotee upcurved a roguish, man-flattering smile.

Even the leaves of the nearby undergrowth—

called shrubbery by courtesy—seemed flustered; in fact, shook so from some internal disturbance that Gloriana watched them a moment suspiciously. As they quieted at once, however, she returned to her mentor and her argument.

“You look mighty noncommittal, but that’s a trick of yours and other wise men. I guess I *have* been an awful goose—no, worse than that. I’ve acted like a mule myself, one of the stupidest kind—and blind as a bat, in the bargain. I don’t mind acknowledging to you, Daniel, that I need a trainer. Con’s got hoss sense compared to me.

“What say, Danny? Oh, excuse *me*, I thought you were going to speak up in my defense! Now, understand, I don’t want to be let off for my foolishness just because I’m a girl. That sex excuse is plumb worn out. But look at my case from the human nature point of view.

“Phil Strong, in the first place, is about the finest specimen of man-flesh I ever clapped eyes on and I’m bred to a failing for fine stock. And then, he’s the only beau I’d ever had, which set him up higher than he could have climbed if I’d been, say, one of those city sirens. Besides, there was that *Montague* and *Capulet* stuff to spur me on—parental feud, forbidden visits, and all that

sort of thing. You know you'd have got kind of keen yourself about any pretty girl you weren't allowed to see. Come across, Dan Dunn; wouldn't you now?"

Unanswered, except for the crack of a twig in the bushes, went the appeal. So far as the sandstone sage was concerned, he looked open to conviction; that was all.

"I'm s'lamming enough to get a word out of you now and then, you old clam!" she complained. "Not but what I'm just as ashamed of myself as I can be. I hate like the dickens to acknowledge what a stubborn chit I've been—just too set on the preconceived idea that Phil was my fate that I couldn't see Mr. Real Man when he came honking along in a gasoline-wagon—not to mention his puttees. But honest, now, I never dreamed until that awful moment when I thought something had happened to him—"

She caught her breath; swallowed hard; glanced up with one of her broken-off appeals to the imagination of others into the sky-blue eyes above. A little, wistful smile twitched her lips as she saw that his severity was relenting—a sunshaft had seemed to light the big soul of him clear through the many coats of paint.



Blue eyes . . . Truly there was more to see in eyes of the sunlit sky than in the black ones of night!

"I'm willing to acknowledge, old scout, that the goingest horses are not always the handsomest," she continued in a rapid, unctuous voice, "of course with all due apologies to Conflagration. He's an exception. And I don't mind telling you that I've fooled myself more than I'll ever let any one fool me, please the good Lord! I ought to have seen long ago that Philip Strong, Jr., was just a well-built corral to shut in the mangiest coyote that ever howled. But what jolts me is that I don't care what he is now—never did—never will. All this I don't mind confiding in you, Daniel; only don't you think it would be more dignified if I let it leak out sort of gradual to—well, to anybody else that's interested?"

For a long moment, the girl's tawny, intense gaze held on the grave, still disapproving face of her life-long friend. Then the look of a frightened fawn entered them, while an eager quiver spread over her lips, her up-rounded cheeks, even over the freckles of her intolerant nose.

"Or would you, Danny, just make a clean breast of it?" she asked. "Would you just take Seth Gilson into the truth—except for a little of

*how much* you are in love with him—and trust that he'll come to a better opinion of you in time? Oh, I know it's awful turn-turtle and hurried, but with Mena and Mary Ellen so happy, it's hard on me to understudy your sphinx-like characteristics. Would you, now, just get engaged to him right away?"

The whole disgraceful truth was out; the nature of her preference patent. With cheeks flushed, eyes now beseeching, dimple and smile doing their coaxing, potent best, Gloriana awaited the verdict.

"Silence gives consent!"

A real voice spoke it—a voice, deep, amused, sanguine, but, withal, as convincing as that of any judge.

With a small cry, she scrambled to achieve her feet. It was well that she had help, for her knees felt weak; and well that strong arms drew her to a support against the chest of a belted Norfolk jacket, detested no longer after her burning cheek once got the feel of it; and well—oh, doubly well that true love's first kiss tells more of respect than could a million phrases.

"You don't mind my following? I thought I ought to see for myself that your advice was good," Seth Gilson said, when coherent speech became a possible and comfortable exchange.

"If you don't mind my being such a ninny. You were right all the time. I never loved Phil Strong at all."

"Of course you didn't. A girl like you couldn't love a man of whom she was ashamed—for whom she apologized the way you did for him to me."

She sighed, then smiled, then hid the smile against the very secretive place she had found.

After that pause, he was again the first to speak.

"Engaged couples give each other presents, you know. You can have anything you like from me to you. But there is only one thing acceptable from you to me. I want Streak."

"You—Streak? What for?"

"For a souvenir of our first meeting. If it hadn't been for my gaping after him, Alonzo would never have driven into that quicksand and you'd never have got such a bad idea of me right at the start. Not that I mind now, the way it's all turned out. But it went kind of hard to be sized up as a truckman when I—"

"When you—" she urged, the memory of a two-finger-rolled cigarette increasing her impatience that he should have stopped just when he was coming to an important point. Even as

her own, especial fiancé, Seth Gilson *was* irritating!

"You see, over in California they call me Burr—the Bronco Burr."

"But I thought you were from—"

"Headquarters are in the District, Miss—soon to be Madam—Young Lady. But everybody in Washington comes from somewhere else and goes home to vote. What would I want of Streak if I were an Easterner?"

"That's what I want to know. What *do* you want of him?"

"To bust him and ride him and love him for life."

"*You think you could?*"

Radiant that he was born of her beloved West, she stood off and sized him up, from cowlick to feet.

"Think? I know I could," he said, looking fully as incapable as she had judged him before seeing him at work.

"Well, Streak is yours, if"—she paused to impress him—"if you will promise me something in return."

"Granted. Said something being?"

"That you'll never change your puttees."

“What, *never?*”

“That is, never exchange them for chaps. I like them—you—all the inconsistencies about you, just as they are.”

Ruefully he glanced down at his rangy self, then at her, to see whether she was making sport of him. But no resentment showed in his odd eyes, which were no longer odd.

“To think that such as I— To think that such as you— Oh, you glory of a girl—my girl and my Glory!”

THE END

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